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Alliances

ICECLAN

Leader - Silverstar: White she-cat with grey mottled over her and light green eyes

Deputy - Icefrost: Light gray tabby She-cat with sky blue eyes, white muzzle and underbelly and has white tipped tail

Medicine cat - Flowertail - Dapple golden she-cat with emerald eyes
Apprentice; Owlpaw

Warriors:
Whiteclaw: Black tom with white fur and blue eyes
Bluefeather: silver furred she-cat with darker stripes and green eyes
Ashfall -Grey she-cat with darker cape over body
Crowclaw - Black Tom with blue eyes and white stripes
Apprentice, Ravenpaw
Darkcloud- Black and White Tom with orange eyes
Briarfang - Brown tom with darker stripes with emerald eyes
Apprentice, Bladepaw
Dawnstripe - Golden tabby she-cat with emerald eyes
Hawkflame - Brown tom that has darker brown that fades in his paws, face and on the tip of his tail and has amber eyes.
Briarpool - Black she-cat with amber eyes
Rainpelt - Dark gray speckled she-cat with deep blue eyes
Apprentice, Snowpaw
Speckledall - Tortiseshell she-cat with emerald green eyes
Apprentice, Springpaw

Apprentices:
(Med apprentice) Owlpaw - A black she-cat
Bladepaw - golden tom with white underfur and has black stripes with blue eyes

Snowpaw - Pure white she-cat with blue eyes
Springpaw - Tortiseshell she-cat with emerald eyes
Ravenpaw - Black tom with white chest and emerald eyes
Queens
Raindapple - Light grey she-cat with white fur and dark grey splotches on back and has blue eyes (Mother to Poolkit and Featherkit)
Swiftfur - Black She-cat with blue eyes (Mother to Bravekit and Duskkit)

Kits:
Poolkit - White she-cat cat with black paws, tip of tail, behind ears, splotches on back and deep blue eyes
Featherkit - light grey tabby she-cat with white muzzle, underbelly, paws and tip of tail and has light blue eyes
Bravekit - Bright brown tabby tom with deep blue eyes and bright peach-color muzzle, underbelly, paws and on the tip of his tail
Duskkit- Light brown tabby she-cat with amber eyes

Elders
Stormclaw - Dark grey tom with black stripes and orange eyes
SwiftWing - Black she-cat with white fur and orange eyes

DAWNCLAN

Leader - Emberstar: Dark ginger tabby tom with emerald eyes

Deputy - Sparrowheart - dark-ginger reddish tom with amber eyes

Medicine Cat: Echofall - grey tabby she-cat with emerald eyes
Apprentice, Leafpaw

Warriors:
Lightning claw - Golden tabby tom with yellow eyes
Aurorafur - Dark ginger she-cat with blue eyes
Glimmerspring - Silver she-cat with black stripes and blue eyes
Gorsefur- Beautiful golden ginger she-cat with emerald eyes

Apprentices:
Leafpaw - Light blue grey furred she-cat with medium length fur and green eyes

Kits:
Goldenkit - Dark golden fur with pale ginger muzzle, under belly and on the tip of his tail. There are visible stripes of darker fur on back

SMOKECLAN

Leader - Darkstar: Black scruffy tom with yellow eyes

Deputy - Midnightmist: Black She-cat with blue eyes. Paws have splotches of white on them and has white in tip of tail

Medicine cat - Icewhisker: White she-cat with pale blue eyes

Warriors:
Foxwhisker - A Orange and white she-cat with emerald eyes
Leopardfur - Golden with dappled orange splotches
Apprentice; Firepaw
Amberclaw - Dark orange she-cat with torn ear
Ripplefur - Grey tom with blue eyes
Apprentice, Hopepaw

Apprentices:
Hopepaw- Fluffy black and white she-cat with green eyes
Firepaw- Grey she-cat with blue eyes

ECHOCLAN

Leader - Miststar: Dark grey she-cat with blue eyes

Deputy - Ravenfeather - Black tom with emerald eyes

Medicine cat: Graypelt - light grey tabby tom with white muzzle, underbelly and on the tip of his tail and has amber eyes
Apprentice; Cottonpaw
Warriors:
Dusksight - Dark ginger tom
Apprentice; Echopaw
Rosethorn - Dark-cream she-cat with amber eyes
Patchdrop - Calico white tom with yellow eyes
Nettlespring -Tortoiseshell she-cat with emerald eyes
Echosight - light pale shaded she-cat that looks like the moon with

light blue eyes

Chapter 1

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Up above is Poolstar's theme song btw-

Poolkit felt a hard thump onto her tail as she tried to sneak out of the nursery.
"Poolkit..."

Poolkit's ears twitched. She was *so close!* She sighed and turned around, grinning innocently. "Yeah mom?" Raindapple looked down at her daughter. "Where are you going..?"
"Outside of the nursery..?"

Raindapple's sat down gently. "Were you going out without my permission..?"
Poolkit glanced sideways. "Noooooo.... Maybeee.."

Featherkit stood up from their mossbed, looking offended. "Were you gonna explore the camp without me?"

Poolkit shook her head, shocked her sister think she would do that. "What? No! I would never!" She was *actually* going to take a peak outside, wait there until Raindapple was asleep, and then fetch Featherkit.

Swiftfur looked over at Raindapple from her moss bed. "Your lucky for your sharp eyes, Raindapple. Bravekit nearly left my sight!"
Poolkit grinned as she whispered into Featherkit's ear. "That's because she's too old for a queen," Featherkit holded a gasp. What was that look for? She was pretty sure there was no code in the warrior code that said you cannot insult queens.

Swiftfur's eyes went into slits as she looked at Poolkit. "What was that?"
Poolkit lowered her ears, nervously. "Nothing!"

Raindapple sighed. "Alright.. but let me at least wash you first."

"Mommmmm!" Poolkit complained as Raindapple licked tongue over her soft fur. Featherkit grinned from the back of Raindapple.

Poolkit shuddered in disgust as Raindapple had finished. "I just want you to look perfect when you meet the Clan."

When Raindapple had finished with Featherkit, she looked up at her mother, getting impatient. "Can we gooo now? Pleassse?"
Raindapple sighed. "Alright. But stay close to each other! And don't try sneaking out of the nursery without my permission again!"

Featherkit laughed as she followed Poolkit out of the nursery.
"Haha! You got in trouble with Mom!"
Poolkit groaned. "Shut up."
Featherkit gasped. "You said a bad word!"
Poolkit shook her head. "It is not! I hear Swiftfur say it all the time!"

Poolkit then looked around. The camp was *huge!* The sky was clear blue! She looked forward and saw a huge rock with slabs out for a cat to climb on it. "That must be where Silverstar makes Clan meetings!"

She turned her head around and saw a similar rock from the Highrock. It had no slabs and it looked like you could easily walk on it, and when you reached the top, there was an entrance in the den.

Featherkit looked at it in awe. "Whoa! What if it's a den?"
Poolkit grinned, "Let's go find out!"

She then felt a trod on her tail and heard a voice from behind her, "I wouldn't advice that, if I were you, young one." She turned around to her and saw Darkcloud. His amber eyes staring into Poolkit and Featherkit, "That is the warrior den, if you did not know."

Poolkit glanced back at it and saw Ashfall coming out of the warrior den and yawning. "Oh."

Darkcloud sniffed. "What are you kits doing out?"
Featherkit looked at them, smiling. "Oh, we're exploring camp for the first time!"

Darkcloud let out a small purr. "Well, if you kits really want to see an amazing sight to see, follow me."
Poolkit grinned. "Yes! Finally!"
Featherkit nodded and followed after.

As Poolkit and Featherkit followed Darkcloud, she looked around at her surroundings. She noticed a gorse tunnel with an entrance to it. It must have be the entrance to camp.

Darkcloud lead Poolkit and Featherkit a pawsteps into clearing and they were in front of a hole at the wall. *What?*
Featherkit's ears twitched. "Why is there a hole inside?"
Darkcloud purred, "It's not a hole. Follow me," He then trodded forward inside.
Realization hit Poolkit. *Is it a den?* It must be important if it's inside a hole.

Featherkit's whiskers twitched, Poolkit nudged Featherkit with her head comfortably. "We'll do it together, now come on!"
Poolkit trodded inside of the den, Featherkit followed after.
"Whoa..." Poolkit and Featherkit said aloud at the sight.

There was no dirt around as they had expected. Inside was stone walls, flooring and two stone shelves at the side of the entrance. There was a turn on the left and Poolkit turned her head left. On the right side of it were moss beds lined side by side together.

A dappled golden she-cat stretched from one of the moss beds. She had white legs, which faded into gold when they met her thigh and she had some white on the tip of her tail and peach-colored inner ears. Her ears were also dark red.

"Good day, Darkcloud. Do you need something?" The she-cat meowed. Darkcloud shook his head, "No, not really, Flowertail. Where is Owlpaw?"
Flowertail glanced at the entrance. "She went out gathering herbs. She's a very hardworking apprentice, I don't know what I would do

without her."

Darkcloud purred. "Speaking of apprentices," he swished his tail right to reveal Poolkit and Featherkit. "We have two on their way to become ones."
Featherkit shyly waved her paw.

Flowertail's face lit up happily. "Kits!" She went forward and licked Poolkit's cheek. It was a thing Raindapple would do to clean fur and she would immediantly back away in disgust. But when it came from this cat, it was kind.. and gentle.

"It's their first time out of the nursery," Darkcloud explained.

Featherkit's ears flicked curiously. "Who is Owlpaw?"
Flowertail purred, "Oh, she's my apprentice."
"*Medicine cat* apprentice," Darkcloud meowed.
"Oh..." Featherkit's tail dropped.

Poolkit sighed. Poor Featherkit... Before they came out of the nursery, Featherkit always talked about being a medicine cat. Now those dreams were shattered..

Flowertail looked at the two kits, sat down and curled her tail in front of her paws. "Tell me about you two."
Poolkit purred, puffing out her chest. "I'm Poolkit and this is my sister, Featherkit! Our mother is Raindapple and our father is Whiteclaw and," She briefly unsheathed her claws then put them back in. "We're gonna be fierce warriors of IceClan!"

Flowertail purred. "Welcome to the Clan, young ones."
"If you haven't gotten into trouble yet, you will soon. Kits always seem to get in trouble," Darkcloud murmured.
"Now Darkcloud, that isn't fair," Flowertail's voice was calm but her tail thrashed left and right.
Poolkit looked up at the older cats. Well, one of them. Raindapple told her that Darkcloud became a warrior two days ago. "Has Bravekit gotten into trouble?" It was hardly an situation, as Bravekit was really sweet and kind.

Darkcloud laughed. "Ha! Far from it. Though, if they ever become

Bravepaw, I would like them as my apprentice."
Flowertail's eyes were looking back outside of the medicine cat den. "Speaking of apprentices, Bladepaw should be ready for their warrior assessment."
Darkcloud shrugged. "Tell that to Briarpool."

Poolkit smiled, she liked talking to Flowertail.. she was nice. She glanced at the entrance of the medicine cat den and noticed the sky wasn't light blue anymore and started having orange streaks.
Flowertail looked at them, "You should get them back to their mother, it's getting late."
Featherkit nodded and stretched, yawning. "Can we visit again?"
Flowertail purred, "Anytime,"

Poolkit liked that. She would definitely visit Flowertail everyday!
"Race you to the nursery!" She called as she ran out of the medicine cat den.

Poolkit and Featherkit hurried back to the nursery and Poolkit crawled inside. Raindapple purred to greet them. "How was the world, little ones?"
Poolkit smiled and went forward and layed next to her mother. "Amazing, we saw everything.."
Raindapple purred, swishing her tail over Poolkit. "I'm glad.."

As her vision faded into dreams, she heard her mother's voice continue.
"Soon, you'll be strong enough to see more than everything.."

Chapter 2

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As sunlight flew inside of the nursery, Poolkit felt a nudge on her small body. "Sweetie.. wake up.." Raindapple's voice called.
"Noo.." Poolkit groaned, covering her face with her black paw. "It's too early.."
There was a sigh sound, "Poolkit, your gonna be meeting your father today."

Poolkit felt excitement surge through her as she stood up immediately and hopped over to Featherkit, shaking her excitedly. "Featherkit! Wake up! We're gonna meet Dad today!"
Featherkit yawned and it took her a moment to process what she had said. "Wait.. Really?"

Poolkit nodded, purring. "Yeah, come on!"
Raindapple was at the entrance, nudging her kits with her tail. "Follow me, dears."

Poolkit and Featherkit trodded after Raindapple where they were at a spot where there was flat ground and no snow at all. It felt weird.. not feeling snow beneath her paws.

Raindapple washes over her kit's ears. "Remember to sit up straight." Poolkit nodded and arched her back upward.
"What does dad look like?" Featherkit mewed.
Raindapple glanced at the sky then back at Featherkit. "He's black and he actually has your eyes, Featherkit."
Featherkit looked up at her mother, "Really?" He mewed with curiosity.

Stormclaw and SwiftWing were laying down together near shade. Owlpaw came out from the medicine cat's den with a ball of moss dangling from her jaws, trodding towards the elders.

Poolkit tried not to shiver. She realized she had to *clean* elders's ticks when *she* was an apprentice.

She then turned her left and saw a strong muscular light gray tabby She-cat. She had emerald eyes and white muzzle and underbelly and has white tipped tail. She seemed to sharing fresh-kill with other warriors.

"Who are those cats?" Poolkit asked, curiously.
"Oh." Raindapple began grooming Featherkit again. As she finished, she looked at the other warriors. "That's Icefrost, the deputy. And they're sharing with Crowclaw, Briarpool, and Hawkflame."
So many names I need to remember.. Poolkit groaned.
But she was awed by how many different pelts there were.
Crowclaw was a black tom with and had white stripes.

She then looked over at the brown she-cat. That must be Briarpool, Darkcloud mentioned that she was Bladepaw's mentor. She had darker stripes and emerald eyes.

Then she looked at the last warrior, his pelt was more different than the others. He was a brown tom but had darker brown that faded into his face, his paws, and his tail. He also had fire-like eyes. *That must be Briarfang.*

She then heard a yowling from the otherside of the clearing. She turned around and saw Bladepaw practicing battle moves with Owlpaw. Owlpaw was a black she-cat with emerald eyes.

She then looked at Bladepaw who was a golden cat with black stripes, white muzzle, underbelly, paws, tip of tail and had blue eyes.

"Nice!" Bladepaw purred. "Now, bring your front paw down hard on your enemy's head!"
Owlpaw sighed. "Bladepaw... I'm going to be a medicine cat, I'm not going to have any enemies, besides, shouldn't Flowertail be teaching me this stuff instead of another apprentice?"
Bladepaw's tail swished back and forth. "Not with that attitude!"

Featherkit covered her mouth with her paw to stop a giggle.

She was turning her head left and right. *Where was Bravekit and Duskkit?*

There was sudden snow-crunching noises coming from the entrance. Raindapple then purred. "The dawn patrol is back! Finally!"

First came a silver she-cat with darker stripes and green eyes, which she was pretty was Bluefeather, who seemed to be carrying a squirrel.

Bluefeather glanced at the kits and nodded. Soon, came another warrior, she was a grey she-cat with light blue and a cape that started from her head to her tail.

Then, Raindapple purred. "There he is!"
A black tom came out from the entrance. Raindapple was right, he did *have* Featherkit's eyes. He was black and had Poolkit's white fur and inner ears. *This is it! I'm about to meet my father!*

As he dropped his prey onto the fresh-kill pile, he trodded forward to his family. "There's my little sunshines. I remember when I saw you when you were so tiny.. Poolkit and Featherkit.. my daughters." Raindapple purred. "Aren't they perfect?"
Whiteclaw's eyes shone onto Raindapple. "Of course they are. They're yours."
Poolkit stuck her tongue out in disgust.

Featherkit looke at her father curiously. "What did you catch?"
Whiteclaw shrugged. "Oh, a vole. Easy to catch, once you start your training."

Poolkit then remembered.. *I am going to be an apprentice!* "Who do you think will be our mentors?"
Whiteclaw shrugged, "I don't know," he mewed. "But I hope Silverstar chooses well for you."

She looked behind Whiteclaw and saw Darkcloud climb down of the warrior's den. With mews of delight, Duskkit and Bravekit pounced on him. Duskkit clung to her father's tail while Bravekit landed

squarely on his shoulders. Darkcloud staggered and, with an exaggerated grunt of surprise, collapsed dramatically to the ground. Duskkit and Bravekit leaped onto his belly, squeaking, but Darkcloud tumbled them off playfully with a purr and chased them away behind the den.

"Let all cats old enough to drift in the snow gather beneath the Highrock!"
Silverstar's call made Poolkit jump. Excitement surged through her! Her first Clan meeting!
"Can we go?" Featherkit mewed.
Raindapple nodded wearily. "If you behave yourselves."
As they padded towards the swarm of cats, Featherkit grinned as she whispered in Poolkit's ear. "That includes you, Poolkit."
Poolkit scoffed. "No fair!"

As Poolkit sat down next to her father, he smiled and curled his tail around her. She glanced left and right. "Where are Duskkit and Bravekit?"
Whiteclaw gave a small purr from his throat, "I suspect they're already at the clearing."
How can she see them with this many cats? She groaned silently.

The early morning sun filtered softly through the trees encircling the camp. The Clan cats were filling the clearing, murmuring excitedly while Silverstar gazed down at each of them from Highrock.

Poolkit glanced at Raindapple murmuring with Darkcloud. "Do you know what the meeting's about?"
Swiftfur turned around, answering before Darkcloud could speak. "I think Silverstar has something planned for two of our kits."

Duskkit and Bravekit were sitting beneath Highrock. The Clan had drawn back, leaving an empty space around them. Swiftfur sat beside Darkcloud at the edge of the clearing. Swiftfur's eyes glowed with pride and Darkcloud puffed his chest and nuzzled against his mate as Silverstar addressed the Clan.

"Newleaf brings with it new hope and warmth. More important, it brings new kits." The silver tabby stretched slightly, peering over

the Clan toward Featherkit and Poolkit. "I would like to welcome Raindapple and Whiteclaw's kits to IceClan. They are a little young for a Clan meeting..."
Poolkit used all her strength to hold back a yowl. SO!? WHY DOES IT MATTER SHE'S YOUNG?!? DOES AGE MATTER IN ICECLAN!?!? "...but I'm glad they're here to see a ceremony they will one day experience."

"Duskkit and Bravekit." Silverstar drew their attention once more, and all eyes fixed on the two young cats beneath Highrock. "You have been with us for six moons and have learned what it is to be a IceClan cat. Today is the day you will begin to learn what it is to be a IceClan warrior."
Mews of approval rippled through the crowd as Silverstar went on. "Duskkit!"
When her name was called, Duskkit stepped forward, her eyes raised to where Silverstar stood on the edge of the Highrock. "From this day forward, you shall be known as Duskpaw." Silverstar turned her gaze to Ashfall. "You will train her, Ashfall. Swiftwing was your mentor, and I hope that you will pass on the fine hunting skills she taught you." Ashfall dipped her head and stepped forward to stand beside her new apprentice.

"Bravekit," Silverstar went on. "I already see your father's courage shining in your eyes. From now on you'll be called Bravepaw, and I will give you Hawkflame as your mentor. Hawkflame, you are ready for your first apprentice and I trust you will pass all you know onto Bravepaw."

Pleased murmers spread through the Clan. "Bravepaw! Bravepaw! Duskpaw! Duskpaw!"

A few apprentices came out of the apprentice den to congratulate their new denmates. Springpaw, Snowpaw, Ravenpaw, and Bladepaw wove around the crowd to get to them.
"We've already made nests for you," Springpaw mewed to the new apprentices.
"Using some of *my* moss," Snowpaw murmured.
Bladepaw grinned. "I made the *best* moss beds out of Snowpaw's and Ravenpaw's moss."
Ravenpaw smiled at the new apprentices then immdieantky cross

their head to Bladepaw. "Yeah! We hope you- Wait- WHAT!?"

Whiteclaw nudged Poolkit to Raindapple and Featherkit. "Go on to your mother and sister," he said as he went and climbed on and into the warrior's den.
Poolkit sighed. She wished Whiteclaw could live in the nursery with her and Featherkit like Raindapple.

As she came to them, Featherkit looked at Raindapple. "Won't Swiftfur miss them?" She asked Raindapple.
"Yes." Her mother's eyes were glazed, but not with tiredness this time. "Come on," she meowed huskily. She swept her tail around her two kits and began to usher them back toward the nursery.
"Can't we congratulate Bravepaw and Duskpaw?" Featherkit asked, digging her claws into the soft earth.
Raindapple nudged her forward with her muzzle. "They're busy with their new denmates."
"*We'll* be their denmates soon," Poolkit mewed excitedly. *I'm going to be the best apprentice ever!!*

Chapter 3

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Art drawn by Viivixen-

Deep in a dream, Poolkit was exploring a forest. She had never been outside of camp, Raindapple had described it in the nursery.. but..But.. it was nothing like she imagined. It was so.. creepy.

The forest she was exploring was shadowy with tall, dark grey trees. The air was cold and damp and had an echoing silence to it. She looked up and saw that the sky was black and starless, and the trees were so tall, it was so hard to anything above them, probably making no light to reach it.
As she kept trodding through the forest, she came upon a sluggish river. It's water was dark and lifeless and she could see that around the river was sucking mud.
As she hopped over the river, and continued into the forest, she could see glowing mushrooms near trees and fungus sickly grown in the trees.

As she pushed through a few bushes, she met face to face with another cat. She was a black she-cat with emerald-green eyes, and she had an sickly-looking scar that went from her eye to her underbelly.

The she-cat purred. "Welcome, young one."
Poolkit gasped at the other cat. "H-hi.. Who are you?"
The black she-cat's tail twitched. "Has IceClan forgotten over me already? My name is Darkfrost." She grinned. "And you are Poolkit of IceClan."
Poolkit looked curiously at Darkfrost, "How do you know my name?"
Darkfrost calmly sat down and groomed herself. "I know all cats from the Clans, and your entire family. Raindapple, Whiteclaw and Featherkit."
Poolkit sat in awe of the she-cat, "Whoa.. so are you from StarClan?"

Darkfrost started laughing. "Haha, no dear. I am from a special place. Sometimes StarClan cats send us to other places for special reasons. Cats like me help train cats from the living world to become better warriors. It's honor to be trained by us," she purred.
Poolkit purred at the she-cat. "Wow!" She never heard of this place, but it sounded so cool! "So what are you doing here?"
Darkfrost's soft gaze then became serious. "I have to warn you of your future.."

Poolkit flinched, "What is it?"
Darkfrost wrapped her tail around Poolkit and looked into her eyes. "A cat you trust the most will betray you in the end and the pools may drop in tears,"
Poolkit flinched. "The cat I trust the most?... Is it Featherkit?" She asked, though she was begging StarClan that it wasn't. Her sister wouldn't betray her! Would she..?
Darkfrost shook her head. "No.. time will tell, Poolkit.." Her pelt started fading, "I must go now, Poolkit.. You will see me again, young one."
Poolkit started out to her. "Wait! I need to learn more! Who is going to betray me?!"

Poolkit woke up with a jolt and felt a short fluffy tail strayed from Briarpool's overfilled nest and was twitching against Poolkit's muzzle. She padded it away, sighing.
Poolkit and Featherkit weren't the only kits in the nursery now. Four moons ago, Briarpool had become a queen and had her kits; a tom and a she-cat, called Blackkit and Icekit.
Blackkit was a pitch-black tom with deep blue eyes which kinda resembled Crowclaw.

And Icekit, who was white with emerald green eyes and had a grey splotch on her face, paws and on the tip of her tail.

It was fun having more kits to play with, even more fun when Dawnstripe had also become a queen and gave birth to Thornkit and Amberkit. Thornkit was a golden-brown tabby tom and had pale blue eyes..

While their sister, Amberkit, was a sleek, dark-ginger tabby with emerald-green eyes.

And now, it was so hard to get ANY sleep.

They were quiet now, but, as Poolkit closed her eyes again, Briarpool grunted in her sleep and, disentangling herself from Icekit, rolled over with a sigh. Blackkit rolled after her, rested his chin on his mother's flank, and began to snore loudly.

Poolkit rolled her eyes as she got to her paws, and stretched. She wasn't going to get *ANY* sleep at this rate.
It was now leaf-fall and she loved it! As leaf-fall had come, it gave off chilly mornings and now, in the nursery, thin streams of cold air trickled through the nursery.
She glanced at Dawnstripe's nest, and saw Amberkit stirred beside Thornkit and pressed closer to their mother.
Trying not to wake anyone, Poolkit squeezed out of the nursery.

The predawn sky stretched overhead, soft and gray as a dove's wing. She recognized the scents of Bluefeather, Ashfall, and Crowclaw, still fresh into the air. They must have left for the dawn patrol.

She was so borrredd. *There is nothing to dooo!* She took a deep breath, and let the scents of the forest flow into her. She smelled, rich with decay, cold, fresh-killed prey. She was excited to be an apprentice, to hunt all the prey in the world, and fight off all the Clan cats that threaten her Clan!
Besides, it won't be long now.. She was six moons now, so she should be an apprentice soon.. But why is Silverstar making it so lonnggg? She wish she could go out and explore the forest!

"Do you want to go out?"
Icefrost's voice made Poolkit jump, and she spun around to see the IceClan deputy was beside her.
"Yess.." she sighed.
"I'll take you out, if you'd like," the IceClan deputy offered.
Poolkit blinked, "But I'm not an apprentice yet. Won't Silverstar be mad?"
"Not if you're with me."
Poolkit grinned. *This is my chance!* She tried to hold in her excitement as she and Icefrost padded through the tunnel. Poolkit followed, feeling her tail brush the cold walls and ground beneath

her paws, smooth from so many paw steps.

As she emerged on the other side of the tunnel, the scents of the forest flooded her nose. Upon her was so much snow! She wanted to roll in all of it, but she had to contain herself. She saw bushes and trees above her covered in snow.
And she could smell so many scents! Earth, leaves, prey, snow, flavors so rich she could taste them on her tongue.
A wind stirred her whiskers; untainted by the familiar scents of camp, it smelled strange and wild.

Icefrost led her along a well-trodden path toward the foot of a slope so steep that Poolkit had to crane her neck to see the top. "We are in the very heart of IceClan territory," She glanced upward. "But up there, at the top of the ravine, the forest stretches to our borders on every side."
Poolkit blinked. "You climb up there?" *Everyday?* She thought miserably as she now knew she'd had to do it everyday as a warrior.

"This is the easiest path." Icefrost padded to a gap between two massive boulders where stone and snow had crumbled into a slope. She bounded nimbly up and leaped to one of the boulders. Looking down at Poolkit, she meowed, "You try now."
Poolkit padded tentatively to the bottom of the rock fall. It was easy to scrabble up the first few tail-lengths, but the slope suddenly steepened and her paws started to slip on the loose stones. Heart racing, she made a desperate leap toward the boulder where Icefrost waited, she then shook out her fur.

Icefrost purred, "It gets better with practice." Icefrost turned and led her along a snowy gully that wove along the slope. It stopped at the bottoms of another huge boulder.
Poolkt groaned. *Why meeeee?*

Icefrost was gazing up at the smooth rock surface, her eyes narrowed. "Can you see the dents and holds where you might get a grip?"
As Poolkit scanned the rock, she started to notice chips and cracks in the stone: a dip in one side that would give her something to push against, a chunk just above it where she might get a clawhold.

She looked up at Icefrost as she motioned upward with her muzzle. "You go first," she meowed. "I'll be right behind in case you slip."

Crouching back on her haunches, she tensed to jump, her eyes fixed on the first tiny ledge where she might get a grip. Trembling with effort, she leaped and hooked a claw onto the chink, she hissed. She hated climbing! She used all her strength to propel herself upward and pushing against the dip of the rock with her hind paws. She was at the neck crack, grabbing hold, pushing upward until the found herself at the rock where Icefrost was.

"Great climb!" Icefrost purred. "Come along,"

Poolkit followed her gaze to a snowy trail with paws looking like they shuffle out the snow to make a pathway. It twined upward through a cluster of small rocks. She followed her along it, letting her paw steps fall in behind hers. A tail-length from the top, the path ended in a sheer wall of rock that leaned out above them. Poolkit could scent the heavy scent of forest and see branch-snow-tipped poking out high above the ravine.

With one leap, Icefrost bounded up and over the edge. Poolkit looked up confidently, and jumped up, reaching up her her forepaws to grasp the rocky cold cliff top. Her muscles burned with the effort as she dragged herself over the edge and flopped on the cold ground, panting.
"Well done," Icefrost purred.

Poolkit grinned as the praise of the IceClan deputy, she had impressed her! She saw a bright light glimmering on her pelt and stepped forward and glanced down the ravine. The camp was hardly visible beneath the snowy treetops, and the clearing appeared as a pale splash beyond the snowy golden leaves.
She twisted her head to look in the snowy forest while the sun was rising. Nearly white bushes crowded the edges, and snowy trees stretched away in the shadows. Branches creaked and shuddered in the wind.
She gasped at the sight. *It was beautiful.*.

She noticed that even though the sun was rising, not a hint of the snow was turning into liquids. When she listened to Elder stories,

they said that StarClan had cursed the forest to have permanent snow in their territory so they could live up to their name. Poolkit didn't believe it at first, but at a sight like this, she believed it all right.

"Come on. Let's get back to camp." Icefrost purred as she turned and disappeared over the edge.
Poolkit sighed, knowing she have to spend more and more days awaiting her apprentice ceremony.

She slid her front paws over the rim of the cliff. She half slid, half fell down the steep tumble of rocks, scrabbled down the face of giant boulder, and trodded towards the other side of the tunnel.

As she and Icefrost trodded out, Silverstar had hopped from one rock to the next to get onto the Highrock. "All cats old enough to drift in the snow, gather below the Highrock for a Clan meeting!"
Icefrost nodded and trodded onto the deputy spot on the Highrock.

She saw the new warriors, Bladewing, Ravenbird, Springleaf, and Snowheart. IceClan has gotten more stronger warriors since then.

"Poolkit!" Poolkit twisted her head around to the nursery to see her family waiting for her at the nursery. When she trodded forward, Whiteclaw was the first to speak. "Where were you?! We were worried sick!"
Poolkit dipped her head, he knew he was just worried for her. "I'm sorry dad.. I just was stretching my legs and then Icefrost had said I could go outside camp with her."
Whiteclaw's gaze widened. "Outside?" He mewed, startled.

Featherkit's mew was sad, "You went outside of camp without me?"
Poolkit affectionally stroked Featherkit's shoulder with her tail. "You were asleep. You know I would never do that to you."
Raindapple sighed and nuzzled her head to Whiteclaw's chest. "It's alright, dear. Poolkit is safe and sound, and that's all that matters."
Whiteclaw had a deep purr. "You're right."

Poolkit twisted her head around to see the cats gathering around the Highrock and turned her head to Whiteclaw. "Can we go now? Pleassseee?" She begged.

Whiteclaw sighed. "Alright. But tell us where you're going next time."

Poolkit nodded and trodded forward, and Featherkit grinned as she sat next to her sister. "I wonder what this is going to be about."

Silverstar let out a meow that echoed to all the cats. "Today, we will be having two new apprentices."
Poolkit's excitement sprang through her. *That must be us!*

"Poolkt and Featherkit." Silverstar was beckoning them forward with her tail.
Briarpool and Dawnstripe backed away to make space beneath Highrock.

Poolkit was already scampering forward and glanced behind her and saw Raindapple nudging Featherkit forward. "Go on. It's your spirit she wants to welcome to IceClan."
After a moment, Featherkit nodded and trodded forward to where Poolkit had sat. Poolkit purred and whispered, "Don't be so nervous, sis. We're finally becoming apprentices!"
Featherkit grinned. "I guess you're right."

Silverstar gazed down. "You have been with us for six moons. Today you will start your training. Your mother and father have been loyal to IceClan and are both brave warriors. May you both tread in their paw steps."

"Featherkit." Silverstar's mew rang out in the cold dawn air as the sun began to turn the snow gold-isn.
Featherkit lifted her muzzle.
"From this day forward you shall be known as Featherpaw."
As Featherpaw dipped her head, Silverstar scanned the warriors watching from beneath Highrock. "Bluefeather," she meowed.
The silver furred she-cat looked sharply up at them, as though surprised.
"You will mentor Featherpaw. Train her to be a fine warrior."
Blinking, Bluefeather stepped forward and touched her muzzle to Featherpaw's head.

"Poolkit," Silverstar went on. "You have reached the age of six

moons, and it is time for you to be apprenticed. From this day on, until you receive your warrior name, you will be known as Poolpaw. Your mentor will be Icefrost. I hope Icefrost will pass all they know onto you."
Icefrost dipped her head and nudged her head with her nose.

Poolpaw was so excited. She was an apprentice of IceClan!

Chapter 4

"Poolpaw! Poolpaw!"

As the Clan began the chant her name, Poolpaw felt pride in herself. She would do everything in her power to defend IceClan.

Whiteclaw trodded forward and nuzzled Poolpaw. "You're going to make a excellent warrior."
Poolpaw purred. "I promise to make you proud!"
Raindapple purred, licking her cheek. "We're so proud of you."
Poolpaw groaned. "Mooomm, stop it."
Featherpaw giggled. "This is so exciting! We're apprentices now!"

Poolpaw spotted Blackkit, Thornkit, Icekit and Amberkit came dashing across the clearing, mewing excitedly.
"You're apprentices!" Amberkit squealed.
Thornkit skipped around them. "We'll miss you in the nursery."
Blackit's eyes were filled with annoyance and glared at Poolpaw. "It's so unfair! She gets to become an apprentice AND have the IceClan deputy as her mentor?"
Poolpaw's fur bristled. *Shut UP, Blackkit.*

Before she could say anything, Featherpaw purred as she gazed down at the kits. "We're gonna be the best apprentices!" And she took her to the congratulating warriors.
"Congratulations!" Briarpool trodded toward them with her tail up.
Poolpaw purred and dipped her head. "Thanks!"

Flowertail joined them, with Owlpaw beside her. "Congratulations, Poolpaw and Featherpaw! You'll be amazing warriors of IceClan in no time!"
"Thank you." Poolpaw nodded and dipped her head.

Briarfang wiped a paw causally over one ear. "It's interesting that Silverstar chose *Icefrost* as your mentor."
Poolpaw dipped her head to one side. "What do you mean?"
The brown tom looked down at Poolpaw. "Don't you think it's too

much of a coincidence that Silverstar chose *Icefrost* as your mentor, the same cat who took you out this morning?"

Poolpaw tried to speak and say: *No! Silverstar chose Icefrost because of Icefrost's qualified skills!* But she couldn't shake away the doubt. What if Briarfang was right? *Had Silverstar really just made her Icefrost's apprentice only because they had gone out?*

Icefrost's playful mew awoke her from her thoughts. "Ready to go out again?"
Poolpaw nodded. "Duh!"

Poolpaw felt a thrill as Icefrost led her through the camp entrance. Excitement surged through her. She was an apprentice now! Her heart was racing as she followed her up the ravine, the path feeling easier now that she knew what to expect.

Rocks clattered behind them and Poolpaw turned to see Featherpaw and Bluefeather bounding up the ravine as well.
"Are you going into the forest, too?" Poolpaw grinned. She gets to share her training with her sister!
"Yes!" Featherpaw purred.

As they all reached the top of the cold cliff rock, Poolpaw felt pride in herself. This was her territory.. and she was going to defend it.
Icefrost spoke. "Today, me and Bluefeather will be showing you the territory and the borders."
Featherpaw meowed in astonishment. "Cool!"

As they jumped down, Poolpaw could see that the snowy trees were thick in this part of the forest, birch and oak overshadowed by the freezing snow on top of all the trees.

As they kept exploring, Poolpaw spotted multiple flat rocks near a river and she raced towards it, cold snow crunching under her paws.
Featherpaw gasped at the sight. "Whoa!"
Poolpaw looked up at Icefrost. "What is this place?"

Icefrost nodded. "This is the boundary between IceClan and DawnClan territory. DawnClan rules the hunting ground beside the

great river. They are called DawnClan for they are known to have glimmering sunlight on them even with trees above them. IceClan and DawnClan have been battling for Icerocks for generations."

Featherpaw gasped. "They don't have snow?!"
Bluefeather shook their head. "Apparently not."
Poolpaw affectionally nudged Featherpaw. "Sucks to be them, then! Guess they won't know the feeling of cold snow under their paws."

Icefrost purred at Poolpaw's comment, "Come along, you two."
"Where do you think we're going?" Featherpaw asked.
Poolpaw shrugged. "I don't know, don't ask me!"
Bluefeather flicked her tail, eyeing the two apprentices. "Shush, don't forget we are close to enemy territory."

They became quiet as Icefrost and Bluefeather led them out of the thick snowy woods. Poolpaw cringed.. It was so WEIRD to not feel any coldness under paws. Instead, she felt.. warmth..

They then led them to a huge clearing, that it could fit literally hundreds of warrior cats. In the middle, there was a steep-sided clearing, and in the center was a large rock and had jagged edges.
Icefrost mewed to Poolpaw, "This is Fourtrees, where the territories of all four Clans meet. EchoClan governs the high ground ahead of us, where the sun sets."
"And SmokeClan holds power over there, in the darkest part of the forest." added Bluefeather, flicking his tail on the right side of Fourtrees.
Icefrost glanced briefly at Bluefeather before continuing. "The four Clans come together peacefully, in a Gathering each moon. Here is where they meet. The truce lasts for as long as the moon is at its fullest."

"Then there must be a meeting very soon?" Featherpaw asked.
Bluefeather purred. "Indeed there is! In a few days, in fact."
"Come on," mewed Icefrost, standing up. "Let's keep moving."

Now they were heading away from the Fourtrees. They crossed the stream at a place where it was narrow enough to leap over in one jump.
As Poolpaw kept on walking, she heard a new noise. She stiffened,

but the other cats kept up their pace, heading straight for the ominous rumbling.

Poolpaw sniffed the air. A new cat-scent touched her mouth glands, strong and sour. "What Clan is that?"
"SmokeClan," answered Bluefeather grimly. "We are traveling along their border. Fresher scent mean that a SmokeClan patrol is in the area."
Poolpaw looked left and right. "Then what's that rumbling noise?"
"You'll see in a moment," replied Bluefeather.

Poolpaw peered through the trees ahead. They seemed to be getting thinner, letting in a broad band of sunlight. Then she stopped and took a deep breath. The green forest scents were overlaid with other strange, dark smells. This time it was not a cat-scent, but a disgusting ew-I-wanna-barf- smell.
And the rumbling was getting louder, a ceaseless roar that made the ground tremble and ached in Poolpaw's ears.
"This is the Thunderpath," meowed Icefrost.

Poolpaw could see a gray path like a river, cutting its way through the forest. The hard gray stone stretched ahead of her so far that the trees on the other side seemed blurred and tiny. Poolpaw shuddered at the bitter smell that rose from the path.

Next moment, she leaped back, her fur bristling, as a gigantic monster roared past.
She noticed that Featherpaw got so scared that she was shaking behind the legs of Bluefeather.

"Scared me too when I was an apprentice," Bluefeather remarked.
"It's time we return to camp," meowed Icefrost.
Poolpaw couldn't help but sigh in relief. All this walking was getting her so tired!

When they had returned to camp, Icefrost curled her tail beside her. "You deserve a meal. Get something from the fresh-kill pile and go share with your denmates." She nodded to the apprentice den and to where Duskpaw and Bravepaw were eating beside the pile of rocks.
Dipping her head to her, she padded to the fresh-kill pile and

picked up a squirrel. As she settled beside Duskpaw, she started taking bites from her squirrel.

Bravepaw was eating a mouse. He paused for a moment. "So what did you do today?"
Poolpaw stared at him. "Me? Oh, Icefrost and Bluefeather took me and Featherpaw to show us around the territory. We saw Fourtrees!"
"Fourtrees seem so big," Bravepaw mewed.
Duskpaw rubbed her muzzle with a paw. "I wonder if StarClan had placed the Great Rock with their own paws themselves."
"*I* wonder if we will ever go to a Gathering." Bravepaw commented.
"Here." He tossed a morsel of mouse to Poolpaw. "F-for you." He said shyly.
Poolpaw didn't know where this shyness came from. "T-thanks Bravepaw."
Bravepaw purred. "Denmates share, right?"

Cheerfully Poolpaw took a bite of the mouse. The forest flavor sang on her tongue. She was so distracted from the juiciness, she didn't hear pawsteps behind her.
"I'll be taking you hunting tomorrow with Featherpaw and Bluefeather."
She looked up and saw Icefrost standing over her. "Really?" She gasped.
Icefrost nodded. "We'll leave at Sunhigh. I hope for you to learn all you can,"
Poolpaw stared after Icefrost as she padded away to join Briarfang and Rainpelt.

Being a IceClan apprentice is the best feeling in the world!

Chapter 5

Poolpaw purred as she watched Featherpaw pace back and forth while they were waiting for their mentors. "Where *is* Bluefeather?" She murmured.
Poolpaw looked at her, she had never seen Featherpaw nervous, except for her apprentice ceremony. "She's putting fresh bracken in the elders's den."
Featherpaw twisted her head towards her sister, "Should I be helping?"
Poolpaw rolled her eyes.

She then spotted Icefrost and Bluefeather trodding forward to their apprentices.
Featherpaw hurried to meet Bluefeather. "I'm sorry," she blurted. "I should've been helping—!"
"No need," she cut her off. "I wanted you fresh for your first day of hunting."
"We're really going?" She breathed.
Bluefeather nodded. "Of course."

"At last!" Poolpaw unsheathed her claws excitedly then sheathed them back in.
"Ready to go?" Poolpaw turned around to see Icefrost behind her.
"I've been ready for ages!" Poolpaw mewed.
Icefrost nudged Poolpaw out the tunnel. "Come on, then."

Poolpaw shot after her, and racing to be the first to the bottom of the ravine. She gazed up at the slope, her paws prickling as she snowy branches swaying like tails, beckoning her into the forest.
Icefrost flicked her tail, "Come along."

Fat white clouds raced across the blue sky as Icefrost led the way up the ravine. As they crested the ridge, wind ruffled Poolpaw's fur and a feeling of fierce joy welled up inside her.
Bluefeather glanced at Icefrost. "The Owl Tree?"
"The Great Sycamore might be better for prey," Icefrost decided.

Icefrost headed into the trees. Following onto her heels, Poolpaw gazed up at the towering trunks. Branches with snow on top of them crisscrossed the sky, shaking a bit as the breeze shook them. It always made Poolpaw nervous. What if a branch had fallen?

Icefrost led them through the aching fonds of a fern where Duskpaw's scent still clung. They skirted around bramble that smelled of Flowertail and Poolpaw could see tiny golden tufts of fur caught on its barbs. Icefrost kept going as the forest sloped steadily upward.

"How much farther?" Poolpaw glanced over her shoulder, trying to memorize the route they came.
"Not much," Icefrost promised.
All the trees and bushes looked the same.
Icefrost finally halted. "Here we are."

Icefrost was in front of them and lifted her chin. Ahead, a gigantic snowy tree towered above the others, its crown stretching beyond the canopy that shielded the sky.
The Great Sycamore.
Its roots, some thick as branches, twisted through dense layers of snow around its base and burrowed into the earth.

Poolpaw's pelt tingled. She could smell prey. Birds chattered in the branches above her head. She took a paw back and felt fallen leaves crunching under her paws.

"The first lesson of hunting," Icefrost began, "is patience."
Bluefeather nodded. "The greatest hunter is the one who knows how to wait."
"Can't we just sift through the leaves till we find something?" Featherpaw asked.
Bluefeather shook her head. "You'll scare everything back to its burrow."

Bluefeather padded toward a bush three fox-lengths from the base of the tree. It was still thick with leaves, and she disappeared behind it. Icefrost followed, beckoning the apprentices forward with her tail. Her tail was held erect and waving from side to side. She had learned from Raindapple that that tail signal meant *Come over*

here.

"Is there prey behind there?" Featherpaw asked, wide-eyed.
"Not if they've got any sense," Icefrost meowed.

Icefrost was already crouching behind the bush, her belly flat to the snow, peering through the low branches toward the roots of the sycamore.
"Get down," she whispered.
Poolpaw did as her mentor said; she crouched next to her, with Featherpaw and Bluefeather beside her. She squinted through the bush, wondering what was supposed to be looking for.
"Don't move till you see your prey," Icefrost advised.

"Will prey come out into the open?" Featherpaw asked.
"Now that we're downwind, some might." Bluefeather told her. "Do you see the sycamore pods?" Poolpaw scanned the ground and noticed some little wings shapes among the leaves, like tiny moths littering the ground.
"Where there are pods there are bugs," Bluefeather meowed.
"And when there are bugs there are prey," Icefrost finished.

Poolpaw looked at her mentor. "What are the hunting techniques for prey?"
Icefrost nodded, "Well, when your stalking a mouse, you have to be light on your feet. A mouse will feel the vibrations in the ground before they see or hear you. When hunting a vole, hunt them quickly in a crouching position. Make sure to kill them quickly. Birds can be hunted in in short stalking to get close. If you aren't close enough, during the final leap the bird could fly away easily. If you stalk them close enough, be ready for a leap to hook your kill. Now for squirrels, speed is the key for squirrels, you may start out slow but you must strike quickly or they will scamper into the trees."
Poolpaw nodded, listening to Icefrost's every word carefully.

The silver warrior stiffened and her ears prickled. Poolpaw followed her gaze. A small, furry shape was skittering along one of the roots.
A mouse!
The fur ripped along her spine, and she unsheathed her claws.
"When do we pounce?" She hissed to Icefrost.

Before Icefrost could say anything, Featherpaw shot forward. She leaped for the mouse and bit into it's neck. She turned and trodded back to her Clanmates. Bluefeather was meowed with delight.
"Great job!"
Featherpaw purred with pride as she put down her catch.
"You were fast!" Poolpaw praised her sister. She *was* a little disappointed that she wasn't able to get the mouse but she put that aside and was proud of her sister!

Icefrost looked at Bluefeather. "Maybe we should do practice stalking."
As Bluefeather nodded, Poolpaw sighed. *Because I hadn't caught anything.*.

But she wanted to make her mentor proud and she eager to show her mentor the skills Bravepaw had already taught her. She dropped low to the ground, keeping her tail pressed against the leaves, and began to stalk forward.
"Not bad," Icefrost meowed. "But lift your tail a little. You don't want it dragging through the snow. Lower your chin, too, and flatten your ears. You need to try to disguise your shape."

"Like this?" Featherpaw crouched beside Poolpaw, ears flat, chin swaying close to the ground like a snake.
"Good," Bluefeather praised her. "Now move forward slowly. Remember, make your movements as small as you can."

Poolpaw put one paw lightly in front of the other, pulling herself forward; she lifted her belly she dragged it on the snow. She placed each paw down so gently that the snow flattening beneath her without crunching.
"Promising," Icefrost purred, and Poolpaw let out a sigh of relief.

They practiced until the sun began to slide behind the trees.
"It's time we went home," Bluefeather announced.

"Just one more go," Poolpaw pleaded. She was so close to being able to move silently through the snow.
"You can practice more in camp, if you like."
"But there aren't any layers of snow there," Poolpaw complained.

Featherpaw sat up and fluffed out her fur. "Come on, Poolpaw. Mom and Dad are gonna get worried and I'm hungry."
Sighing, Poolpaw straightened up. "Okay."

She watched Bluefeather and Featherpaw head through the trees.
"We can practice again tomorrow," Icefrost promised, bounding away to catch up with Bluefeather.
Poolpaw trailed a few tail-lengths behind her Clanmates, wishing she could practice more.

Suddenly she heard the skitter of paws on bark. She froze. Glancing sideways, she spotted a squirrel sitting on a tree root with a nut between its paws. It was gnawing busily, absorbed in its tasty morsel.
Poolpaw dropped into a crouch. Raising her belly and lifting her tail so it just skimmed the leaves, she began creeping toward it, silent as a snake on a rock, she was trembling with excitement; her heart was pounding so hard, she thought the squirrel must hear it.
But the squirrel only carried on gnawing until Poolpaw was so close, she could hear its teeth scrape into the nut. Holding her breath, she stopped and pressed her backside to the ground, tensing the muscles in her hind legs.
Now!
The squirrel had no time to move. She knocked it from the root, pinned it to the ground, and sank her teeth into its neck. The warm tang of blood surprised her as the squirrel went limp beneath her paws.

"What's happened?" Icefrost leaped into the root behind her, her pelt bristling.
Poolpaw sat up with a heavy squirrel hanging from her jaws.
Icefrost's eyes gleamed. "Well done!"

Bluefeather and Featherpaw appeared behind her. Featherpaw's eyes grow round, and Bluefeather opened her mouth and stared for a moment.
"Did *you* catch that?"
Joy rising like a bird in her heart, Poolpaw nodded.
"It's almost as big as you," Featherpaw whispered.

"Give thanks to StarClan for the life this creature has given to feed

the Clan," Icefrost meowed.
Thank you, StarClan!

Icefrost brushed against her. "Let's get it back to camp while it's still warm."
Poolpaw was relieved when she took the squirrel from her. She'd been wondering how she'd carry it home without tripping.
"Thanks." She trotted happily past her and headed for the ravine.

"No way!" Duskpaw stared in disbelief as Icefrost laid the squirrel on the fresh-kill pile.
"All by herself!" Featherpaw boasted about her littermate.
Poolpaw purred as Clanmates gathered to see her catch, she'd liked that her Clan was praising her.
"Was that your first hunting session?" Bravepaw asked. He sounded really impressed.
Poolpaw nodded.

"You're lucky to have her," Rainpelt told Icefrost.
"IceClan's lucky to have her!" Hawkflame's fiery orange eyes were round. "I don't remember any other apprentice catching prey on their first try."

Whiteclaw and Raindapple came straight ahead into the crowd.
Whiteclaw wrapped his tail around Poolpaw, looking proud. She felt Raindapple's muzzle brush her cheek. "I'm so proud," she whispered.
Whiteclaw let his tail go of Poolpaw. "We both are,"

"*I'm* going to catch something bigger than yours!" Featherpaw promised.
"It's not a competition," Bluefeather reminded her.

Stormclaw padded from the elders's den. "I smell fresh squirrel."
Featherpaw skidded to meet him. "Poolpaw caught it," she announced.

While Stormclaw admired the catch, Icefrost took Poolpaw aside.
"I'm very impressed with you today. You listened well and you learned quickly."
Poolpaw felt a purr spring in her throat. She did it! She impressed

her mentor!
"I want you to come to the Gathering tonight."
Poolpaw holded back a gasp. It was a HUGE honor to be selected to go to the Gathering! She'd always dreamed of going to Gathering!
Poolpaw nodded at once.
"Good. Now get some food and rest as much as you can. We'll leave when it gets dark."

Featherpaw looked expectantly at her mentor and Bluefeather nodded. "I would like to take Featherpaw to the Gathering as well, as they had caught a mouse on their first hunting lesson."
Featherpaw purred and nuzzled Poolpaw. "We get to go to the Gathering together!"

Chapter 6

[image] [image] [image] [image]

Poolpaw felt excitement surge through her as she saw other Clan cats with so many different smells! Featherpaw crouched beside her. Next to them was a group of IceClan elders, queens and warriors waited in the undergrowth for Silverstar to give the signal.

"Look at all those cats down there!" hissed Poolpaw under her breath.
"Look! I think that's Emberstar, DawnClan's leader! Bluefeather told me about him!" Featherpaw hissed back.
"Where?" Poolpaw mewed, nudging Featherpaw impatiently.
"That dark-ginger tabby! Beside the Great Rock!"
Poolpaw followed Featherpaw's gaze and saw a big, muscular dark-ginger tabby tom who had light underbelly and muzzle and had emerald eyes.

Poolpaw gasped as she saw a black tom with fiery orange eyes look up at the Great Rock in the moonlight. She recognized his smell immediantly. Icefrost had told her about him. "Look! There's Darkstar—SmokeClan's leader!"

She then saw a pale-blue she-cat with lighter muzzle and underbelly and had sky blue eyes. *That must be Miststar, leader of EchoClan!*

Silverstar stood, and, holding her tail high, flicked it from one side to the other. Poolpaw's heart missed a beat as her Clanmates rose as one and bounded through the bushes, down toward the meeting place. She raced alongside them, feeling the wind rush in her paws and her paws tingled with excitement.

Raindapple wrapped her tail around her daughter. "Come sit with us, dear."
Poolpaw sighed. Even though she loved hanging out with her family, this was her only opportunity to meet other Clan cats! *I know there are gonna be other Gatherings but you know what I mean*, she thought.

Poolpaw looked at Raindapple. "Can I watch the Gathering by myself? Pleaseeee?"
Raindapple sighed. "Oh, alright. Go ahead,"

She trodded forward and squeezed in toward a line of cats. She looked up at the Great Rock, excitedly wondering ehat would happen tonight.

Someone shoved Poolpaw from behind. Her forepaws nearly tripped on the earth, and she almost lost her balance. Crossly she jerked her head around.

Clumsy frost-brain! "You nearly knocked me over!" The she-cat behind her had exclusively shades of gold, golden-brown eyes and what looked like a sun on her chest.

Design drawed by ArenaTyke

The she-cat sat back up instantly, her whiskers splaying in a playful grin. "Sorry, guess you were just in my way."
Poolpaw had to hold in all the things she wanted to say to this she-cat. *IN YOUR WAY!? OHH IMMA NAIL YOU DOWN FOOL!*
She did her best to stop her fur from bristling and tried her HARDEST to stay calm. "Sorry. What's your name?"

The she-cat grinned wildly. "My name's Sunpaw," her tail flicked and sat up. "I'm from DawnClan, your from IceClan, right? Were you rolling in flowers or something? Your Clan's scent is masked in something flowery. Ah, sorry I mean, I'm Sunpaw and you are?"
Poolpaw raised an eyebrow amusingly. Maybe it was an accident after all. *BUT DON'T SAY YOU WERE IN MY WAY TO THE CAT WHO MIGHT END YOUR LIFE!*
"I'm Poolpaw. Also, how can we be flowery if we LITERALLY live in snow?"

Sunpaw's ears twitched. "Poolpaw... That's a pretty name! Also I don't know! It's just what my nose tells me! Don't you guys have SOME flowers there? Or were you helping your medicine cat or something? I don't know, but you smell really nice and-!" Sunpaw shook herself. "I'm ranting again. Aha.. well.. uh.. I've just met you so I hope you don't hate me already! I promise I'm not that weird—I

mean—uh—yep." Her ears dropped slightly and she gave Poolpaw a guilty smile. "I'm not great at talking to cats from other clans—I mean cats my age at least—uh—sorry.." She cast her another shy-guilty grin.

Poolpaw purred. This cat was just like Owlpaw! "I know a cat that is like you, so don't worry! Also, just because we have herbs doesn't mean we roll around in them and say 'Oh wow! I love rolling around in flowers that heal me'!" She said the last part in a girly voice.
Sunpaw's ears twitched again and she shot Poolpaw a wide grin. "I bet you do."

Poolpaw glance left and right. She wondered if there were other DawnClan apprentices like Sunpaw. "Are there other apprentices in your Clan?"
Sunpaw nodded. "Yeah. There's Goldenpaw and my brother, Pinepaw. There are other apprentices in IceClan, right? I think I've seen some of them."

Poolpaw looked at Sunpaw. "Wait... did you say you have a brother? Me too! Well... I have a sister, Featherpaw." She flicked her tail over to Featherpaw sitting next to Bluefeather.
Sunpaw followed her direction and her eyes landed on Featherpaw. "She's pretty, but not as pretty as you—I mean your both pretty, but your prettier? If you get what I mean? My brother's a bit of a stubborn mouse-brain and... well we don't talk much, he wants to be the next leader of our clan and well..." Sunpaw shook her head slightly. "Well anyways, what do you like doing?"

Poolpaw thought her words carefully. At the mention of leader, she had dreams of herself being leader. Poolpaw purred. "Planning to be leader, hunting, fighting and stuff. Hey, maybe if they both become leader, we could be deputies together."
Sunpaw purred. "Yeah, that would be cool! I'm sure you'd make a great deputy. I doubt my brother would choose me to be his." There was a slightly sadder tone to her mew but then she gave Poolpaw a bright grin. "I like you. Your cool, and not just cause your from IceClan."
Poolpaw sighed. She had heard enough IceClan puns in her life, and she was getting tired of them..

Sunpaw cast her head around the clearing. "Speaking of deputies, where are they?"
Icefrost turned their sharp pale blue gaze on them. "The ICECLAN deputy is right in front of you, and she'll pull out your whiskers if you don't do as you're told and be quiet!" She hissed slightly and stalked off.
Sunpaw jumped and turned her head toward Icefrost and as she stalked off, she turned back to Poolpaw and whispered in a barely audible voice. "Jeez, who put yarrow in her prey this morning?"
Poolpaw giggled. "Well, at least your question answered. That's Icefrost, our deputy and my mentor."
Sunpaw smiled wildly. "Oooooooo, as her apprentice, can you tell me..." She shot her a sneaky grin. "Is she always this grumpy?"
Poolpaw giggled. She would never... in a million moons describe Icefrost as *grumpy*. "What! No, she's usually calm most of the time."
Sunpaw started giggling. "Wow, she must not like me already, making a great impression on your mentor, aren't I?" She chuckled.

Miststar stood on the side of the Great Rock. "Cats of all Clans, welcome. EchoClan is doing well, we have plenty of prey and have restocked our medicine supplies."
Silverstar stepped forward. "IceClan is thriving with much prey and herbs as well. And, we have many new apprentices. Poolpaw, Featherpaw, Bravepaw and Duskpaw!"
The Clan cats started chanting. "Poolpaw! Poolpaw! Featherpaw! Featherpaw! Bravepaw! Bravepaw! Duskpaw! Duskpaw!"
Poolpaw felt pride in herself as the Clan cats started chanting her name.

Emberstar lifted his muzzle. "DawnClan has been free from a few loners who had thought it was good to trespass into DawnClan territory."
"Was there a loner attack?" Poolpaw asked.
"Everything was fine in the end," Sunpaw whispered.
Poolpaw nodded.

Emberstar flicked his tail. "Prey is good despite the loner inference."
Sunpaw nodded their head. "Yeah, everyone is really well fed right now," Sunpaw whispered to Poolpaw.
Annoyance pulsed through Poolpaw. She wanted to shout at

Sunpaw. *I ALREADY KNOW THAT, FROST-BRAIN! YOUR LEADER TOLD ME! STOP REPEATING THINGS I ALREADY KNOW!*

Briarfang flicked her ear with his paw. "Hush! How many times do you have to be told?"
As Briarfang trodded back to where they were, Poolpaw did a raspberry in annoyance of Briarfang.
Sunpaw giggled softly. "Who was that?" She muttered softly, grinning at Poolpaw.
Poolpaw looked at Sunpaw. "That's Briarfang, now HE'S the grouch."

Darkstar was speaking. "It is with sadness that I must announce that one of our elders, Heatherheart, has passed away and joined StarClan."
Poolpaw dipped her head sadly for the fallen elder.

Silverstar looked at the cats below. "This Gathering is dismissed!"
The leaders soon jumped off of the Great Rock.

"Awww." Sunpaw mewed. "I don't wanna leave youuuu." Sunpaw leaned against Poolpaw dramatically then her eyes glittered slightly. "Hey, Poolpaw.. how up to breaking the rules are you?" She mewed softly.
Poolpaw felt ice climbing along her spine. She felt frozen. Was Sunpaw suggesting they broke the Warrior code? She thought with horror. "Like what?"
"I mean, nobody's gonna be here tomorrow night..." Sunpaw mewed lightly. "And I was wondering if you wanted to climb the great rock with me...?" Sunpaw blinked at Poolpaw softly. "So whatcha say?"
Poolpaw was struck. "Isn't this.. breaking the warrior code?"
"Only a little." Sunpaw twitched her ears. "If you wanna train to be leader of IceClan.. what better way to prepare than seeing what it would be like to attend a gathering as a leader? Besides, if we get caught I'll take all the blame for us so you won't get in trouble."
Poolpaw was in horror. *Say something! Give her answer! Anything!*
"Alright, see you tommorow night."

WHAT DID I JUST SAY!?

She didn't want to see her anymore. She raced after her Clanmates.

Featherpaw padded up to her, "Hey, Poolpaw! You alright?"
Poolpaw took a deep breath. "I'm *fine*."

When I'm really not...
What am I going to do?

Chapter 7

Poolpaw watched as the sun started setting on the horizon. She'd made a thorn stick into her paw-pad so she wouldn't be busy with training. Luckily, Flowertail had said it will be good by tomorrow, so she had to stay in camp.

She knew this was so, so wrong. *Am I crazy?* Yes, she was. She would do anything to not break the warrior code.. bit she had promised Sunpaw and she didn't want to disappoint her.

Poolpaw got to her paws. Glancing around the nests, she looked for eyes glancing in the darkness. She skirted to the clearing, keeping to the shadows.

She crept toward the tunnel and crouched in the entrance. She could hear Rainpelt keeping watch outside, her pelt brushing the tunnel as she fidgeted. She waited until she heard her paw steps pad away. She waited a moment, then scooted through through the tunnel and slipped into the bushes on the other side.
No sign of Rainpelt.

She darted out from the snow and clambered over a rock, slipping down behind in, her breath coming fast.

Silently, swiftly, she raced along the ravine and bounded up the rocks, careful not to disturb any loose stones. The moon lit her way as she scrambled over the top and sneaked into the forest.

She took a deep breath. *Please forgive me, StarClan...*

She then went through the bushes, leaves crunching under her paws and she saw Sunpaw, who was sitting underneath the Great Rock. Sunpaw sat up, eyes brightening. "Hey," she purred happily.

Poolpaw had a small anger at Sunpaw. *I shouldn't be doing this! And neither should you!* "You're lucky I was able to get away." She looked at Sunpaw in the eyes.

Sunpaw got up and shook some leaves out of their fur. "Was it difficult? I suppose I didn't really think about how hard it would be for you to get away. I mean, it's always easy for me to get away, sorry."
Poolpaw looked in horror. *THEY BREAK THE WARRIOR CODE ALL THE TIME!?*

Sunpaw's tail swished and they padded over. "How was your day?"
Poolpaw thought of basically getting a thorn in her pad and having to stay in camp all day. "Fine, I guess.." She needed to do something. "I'll race you to the top of that oak!" She raced away.
She heard Sunpaw's mew behind her. "Oh, your so on!"

Poolpaw jumped up with her claws stretched out, and gripped the bark with her front claws. Taking a deep breath, she scooted upward, bounding onto a low branch.
Sunpaw leaped straight up onto the branch above Poolpaw instantly.

Poolpaw reached up to a knotty hole and was hanging from it. "Gah... how do you always do it?"
"Moons of practice." Sunpaw mewed, "Just focus and use your back legs to propel yourself up."
Poolpaw nodded and did as Sunpaw told her. She dug her claws into the knotty hole and hauled herself up.

Poolpaw looked up at Sunpaw as she caught bark with her claw and propelled herself upward. "I know you have a smug face."
Sunpaw dropped down on Poolpaw's level and had a smirk on her face. "Aww, how'd you know."

Poolpaw sighed. "I hate you." She then scrambled up to the next branch.
Sunpaw laughed, lightly leaping up to the next branch. "You loveeeeeee me."
Poolpaw rolled her eyes. "In your dreams." She jumped up to the next branch.
"Hmmm...maybe.." Sunpaw started laughing as she jumped up to the next branch while giggling.
Poolpaw grinned. "Thought so."

Poolpaw climbed up through the tree, sending half dead leaves showering down. The Great Rock looked like a pebble by the time they'd reached the highest branch that would support their weight.
"What do you think of the view?" Sunpaw mewed softly.
She felt like she could see all of the Clan territories from here.
"Wow."

She looked and saw the twinkling stars in the night sky. They shouldn't be doing this.. "Do you think StarClan knows what we're doing?"
Sunpaw looked up with her. "They probably have more important things to worry about. But then again, there are a lot of cats up there in Silverpelt. So, maybe a cat from StarClan knows what we're doing."
Poolpaw looked at her in horror. *More important things than cats who have broken the Warrior code!?*

Poolpaw sighed, looking down at her black paws. "They must be angry with us for doing this."
Sunpaw turned to look at her. "They're a bunch of dead cats in the sky who have lived through whatever. They've probably seen, or done, a lot worse in their lifetimes." She mewed.
Poolpaw looked at her, not feeling convinced. "I guess your right. Let's go down," Poolpaw suggested.

Poolpaw sighed happily as she got down. She needed to tell Sunpaw. "Well, this has been fun."
Sunpaw smiled. "It has. But there's one more thing, follow me."
Sunpaw turned straight towards the Great Rock and looked at Poolpaw from below. "C'mon, this'll be fun!" She purred.

Poolpaw wanted to scream at Sunpaw. *IT'S NOT FUN IF IT'S BREAKING THE WARRIOR CODE!!!!* She wanted to yell at her SO. BAD.

Poolpaw sighed as she climbed up the Great Rock. "What's so fun about this?"
Sunpaw purred excitedly, her tail swishing. "Just think about sitting up here, seeing all of those cats looking up at you with admiration, wouldn't it be wonderful? Also, cause breaking the rules is fun!"

Poolpaw shivered, wanting slap Sunpaw. "I hate breaking rules... Sunpaw, we shouldn't be doing this... We should only meet at Gatherings."
Sunpaw sighed. "I know, but.. I like talking to you. Why should we only see each other at Gatherings? Why can't we go hunting together? Just run around the forest? Have fun together?"
BECAUSE IT IS AGAINST THE WARRIOR CODE!

Poolpaw looked at her anger in eyes. "You may like breaking the rules, but I don't. If you really cared about me, you would respect my wishes."
Sunpaw sighed softly. "I do care about you, and I respect that that's what you want," Sunpaw smiled "I live for the freedom, but breaking the rules isn't for everyone, and I can't wait to see you again, if it has to be until the next gathering, then so be it I guess."

Sunpaw leaned in to nuzzle her gently. "May starclan keep you safe until we see each other next." She purred softly, her whiskers splaying.
Poolpaw nodded. "See you at the next Gathering."

Excitement surged through her as she ran into the bushes. *I promise you StarClan, that I will never break the warrior code again!* As she kept running into the woods, she glanced behind her and watched as Sunpaw left Fourtrees too.

I hope your consequences will come.. before you fall any further into the hole you've dug for yourself.

Chapter 8

Poolpaw padded past her sister pushed through the apprentice den as morning started rising and orange streaks started fading from the sky.

She then noticed Featherpaw trodding toward the entrance to camp.
"Where are you going?" Poolpaw mewed.
Featherpaw glanced back at her, "Bluefeather's taking me hunting again so I can practice my stalking, Icefrost said since your still healing from that thorn, you can stay in camp for today."
Poolpaw cursed Sunpaw. *The next time I see you Sunpaw, I gonna kill you!*

After she watched Featherpaw leave camp with Bluefeather, Poolpaw padded to the fresh-kill pile. Her squirrel was gone, and she sighed, disappointed she wasn't able to eat her own first kill.

Icefrost was sheltering beside the frozen nettle patch with Owlpaw and Flowertail, hunched against the wind.
Poolpaw hoped she could get a chance to hunt. "Am I supposed to hunt before I eat?" Poolpaw called to her.
Icefrost shook her head. "You must be hungry after last night. Eat first, and then clear out the nursery."

Poolpaw nodded and took out a vole from the pile, carrying it to the rock pile. There were no sign of Duskpaw or Bravepaw; they must be out training.

As she swallowed the last mouthful, Owlpaw padded toward her. "I've got some fresh bedding stored in the medicine clearing," she told her. She sniffed the air. "There's rain coming, so I collected some while it was still dry. Help yourself when you need to refill the nests in the nursery."
"Thank you." Poolpaw ran her paw over her muzzle and got to her paws. "I'll clear out the old stuff and then come get it."

"Don't worry," Owlpaw mewed, "I'll bring it over."

Poolpaw wanted to ask something, "Hey.. how long have you been a medicine cat apprentice?"
Owlpaw shrugged. "Not that long. I went to the moonstone the day before your first day out of the nursery,"
Poolpaw looked at her. "How long does it take to become a full medicine cat?"
Owlpaw took a deep breath. "Really, reallly long. And it'll be much longer for me, probably when there is a new leader since I became an apprentice when I was only one moon old."
Huh. Poolpaw thought.

Poolpaw now need to get to work. She padded to the nursery. She hadn't been back here since she'd move to the apprentice's den, and it felt familiar yet strange to be squeezing in through the entrance. She remembered straight ahead that Raindapple wasn't a queen anymore and was now back to being a warrior when she couldn't see any sight of Raindapple.

Dawnstripe was curled in her nest with Thornkit and Amberkit, offering them a morsel of mouse.
"It's chewy," Amberkit complained.
"I'll eat your bit," Thornkit offered.

"You've had plenty," Dawnstripe chided. "If you want more, you can go to the fresh-kill pile."
"Really?" Thornkit's ears prickled. "Can I choose anything I want?"
"Yes," Dawnstripe answered, "but nothing too big."

"I'll go with him," Blackkit offered.
"Good idea." Briarpool pushed Icekit off her belly. The small, white she-kit opened her mouth, eyes wide with complaint, but Briarpool silenced. "Why don't you go outside and play, too?"
"Come on!" Blackkit urged. "It'll be fun!"
"But it's cold," she grumbled. "When Owlpaw brought the mouse, she said rain's coming."
"All the more reason to get some exercise before it does," Briarpool advised.

Poolpaw let out a small meow to let them know she was there.

"Hello, Poolpaw!" Briarpool broke into a purr. "I didn't see you come in. I hear you made a great catch yesterday. Stormclaw was certainly pleased to have such a big meal."
"I was just lucky," Poolpaw said casually, trying to hold down the purr of pride in her throat.
"I'm sure it was more than luck," Briarpool meowed.
Poolpaw finally let out her purr. "I've come to clear out the den."

"There!" Dawnstripe meowed, whisking Thornkit and Amberkit out of the nest with her tail. "It's time you all went outside and got some fresh air. Poolpaw will need room."
Icekit sat up. "But what if it rains?"
"It's too chilly to go out," Amberkit wailed.
Dawnstripe rolled her eyes. "All IceClan cats for generations can withstand subzero temperatures."

"It's okay, I can work around you." Poolpaw offered.
"No," Briarpool meowed firmly. "True warriors don't hide from the weather."

"Exactly," Blackkit agreed. "Come on, you two." He padded around the den, nudging each of the other kits toward the entrance. "I'll make sure the wind doesn't blow you away."
Thornkit was already outside with the others, muttering complaints, letting themselves be herded from the den.

Briarpool rolled onto her back and stretched. "You must be tired after the Gathering." She yawned.
"How was it?" Dawnstripe asked.
Poolpaw didn't say that an annoying yet funny code-breaker had basically forced her to break the warrior code. "It was great."

Trying to change the subject, she looked at the two queens, "So wow. Lots of kits.."
Dawnstripe nodded, puting in her agreement, "Mhm. Me and my mate are proud of Thornkit and Amberkit,"
Briarpool. "I remember a time where there have been both female mates."
Dawnstripe looked at Briarpool, "I'm more into males."
Poolpaw shrugged. "I am in a bit of both,"

She began plucking old straws and strands of bracken from the edges of Dawnstripe's nest.
Owlpaw scraped through the stone floor with two bundles of moss.
Owlpaw dropped the moss by her front paws.

After some work, she heard a mew. "Poolpaw! Poolpaw!"
Featherpaw's mew came from the clearing outside. She sounded excited.
Poolpaw glanced at Owlpaw, she knew she was an apprentice like her, but she was a *medicine* cat apprentice. She wondered if she'd mind her if she left her for a moment.
"Go on," Owlpaw mewed. "I'll manage here."
Quick as a mouse, Poolpaw turned and slid out of the den.

Featherpaw was sitting proudly by the fresh-kill pile. A sparrow lay at her paws. "My own catch!" she called as Poolpaw raced to join her.
Poolpaw sniffed the sparrow. It smelled fresh and warm, and it made her mouth water. "My favorite!"

Flowertail, crouching by the frozen nettle patch, got to her paws and wandered over. "You are *both* amazing hunters, IceClan honors that." She meowed approvingly.

But when she glanced down to admire the sparrow, bright sunlight springed onto the sparrow all of a sudden, she froze and her brushed out as her eyes grew as wide as a owl's.
"Oh no!" She yowled.
Poolpaw peered at the sparrow. Was she shocked from the sudden sunlight spraying onto the sparrow?

Flowertail's eyes had glowed pure white for a brief second and then she was shaking from nose to tail-tip. "Dear, StarClan!" She wailed, ringing around the camp. "A sign from StarClan! Destruction for us is coming!"

Chapter 9

"What's happening?" Silverstar was at the medicine cat's side in an instant, Icefrost at her heels.

Briarfang and Whiteclaw, sharing a thrush beneath Highrock, swung their broad heads at Flowertail. Dawnstripe slipped from the nursery entrance, her gaze darting anxiously around the clearing till it rested on the kits. Blackkit was charging toward the fresh-kill pile with his denmates clustered behind.
Hawkflame and Ashfall came down from the warriors's den and hurried after Bluefeather and Crowclaw.

"Look at the sunlight," Flowertail breathed, her eyes still fixed on the prey.

Poolpaw, suddenly crowded out by her Clanmates, slipped between legs and under bellies to see the sparrow. Flowertail was pointing a claw at the prey.

"Look," the medicine cat spoke. "See how *dawn* sunlight sprays across the sparrow?" Her tail lashed back and forth. "A stray of daylight just doesn't appear out of nowhere! And on a *sparrow*!"

"But what does it mean?" Silverstar demanded.
"DawnClan is the Clan where they get most sparrows," Flowertail growled. "I saw a vision and how we will be crushed by DawnClan."

Snowheart leaned forward. "How can you be so sure?"
"She's a medicine cat!" Briarfang snapped. "She shares tongues with StarClan!"

"This sign was sent by StarClan as a warning," Flowertail went on. "Like a storm, DawnClan will rage through the forest. They will destroy us, and make IceClan territory a wasteland. We will be clawed down like cracking down ice."

Raindapple nosed in beside Poolpaw. "That's impossible!" She

meowed.
Whiteclaw wrapped his tail protectively around Poolpaw, his pelt bristling.
She could feel her parents trembling.
Around the clearing, she could see some of her Clanmates exchanging fearful glances.

Flowertail dipped her head. "StarClan has spoken."
Silverstar was staring at the sparrow. "When?" She rasped.
Flowertail blinked. "I can't tell. But the sign has been sent now to give us time to prepare."

"Then we must prepare!" Whiteclaw yowled, lashing his tail.
"There's no time!" Ravenbird barged forward and hooked the sparrow with one claw, holding it for all the Clan to see. "We must attack first!"
Briarfang and Whiteclaw yowled in agreement.
Springleaf clawed the ground. "DawnClan doesn't know we've been warned. We have the advantage. We must use it!"

Silverstar took the sparrow from Ravenbird and laid it back on the ground. "We have many kits, and our kits need to be fed," she meowed slowly. She gazed around at her Clan. "Can we really risk fighting and injury when we should be strengthening our Clan?"
"Can we risk *not* fighting?" Ravenbird hissed. "StarClan has warned us that there may be no Clan to strengthen if we don't act!"

Swiftfur padded forward, her black pelt bristling. "Should we really attack on nothing more than a piece of prey?"

There was a gasp from some of her Clanmates. Bravepaw whispered, "You can't challenge the medicine cat like that!"
Poolpaw glanced at him; she wasn't sure if he'd meant anyone to hear.

Briarfang's tail quivered. "Is it Flowertail you doubt, or StarClan?" he challenged.
"If we can't trust StarClan, then we are lost," Springleaf muttered.

Poolpaw saw anguish darken Silverstar's gaze. She had a sudden, painful understanding of the decision that lay in her paws. Attack

DawnClan and risk death and injury to her Clan. Delay, and risk being wiped out. And all hung on the meaning in a dead sparrow.

Whiteclaw began to pace. "Why are you hesitating? The decision is easy! You are choosing between survival and destruction!"
Icefrost paced in front of her leader. "But who knows which action will cause destruction and which survival?"
"I think StarClan has made that clear," Snowheart growled.

Poolpaw could see Silverstar's gaze darting around her Clan, glittering with unease. She knew her father wanted to fight so he could protect his family, and Briarfang wanted to fight from the start. And now they had the backing of StarClan. How could Silverstar refuse? What would happen if she did? How could she lead IceClan without the respect of her warriors?

Silverstar dipped her head. "We'll attack DawnClan at dawn."

Murmurs of approval swept through the warriors closest to the leader; at the edges of the clearing, elders and she-cats muttered darkly.

Dawnstripe stared in dismay at the sparrow, pressing Amberkit against her. "It's okay," she whispered, pressing her muzzle against her daughter's soft head. "You'll be safe in the nursery." Her gaze lifted to meet Snowheart's, and a flash of fear passed between them that made Poolpaw's pelt bristle.

Raindapple tensed beside her. "Will *all* the apprentices have to fight?"
Poolpaw's felt excitement surge through her. Would this be her first battle?
"All *must* fight when we face this much danger!" Briarfang meowed.

Silverstar turned to Hawkflame. "Is Bravepaw ready for battle?"
Hawkflame nodded, reluctantly.
"Then he will be part of the battle party." Silverstar's gaze turned to Ashfall. "You and Duskpaw will remain behind with Crowclaw and Speckledall to defend the camp in case DawnClan counterattacks."
Duskpaw began to object. "But I want to—!"
"We'll defend the camp with our lives if necessary," Ashfall cut her

off.

"What about Featherpaw and Poolpaw?" Whiteclaw demanded, a tremor in his mew.
Silverstar blinked. "I would never send apprentices into battle with so little training," she assured him.

"But I want to fight!" Poolpaw's ears prickled.
"No, Poolpaw." Silverstar shook her head. "You won't fight. But you will have a taste of battle."
Poolpaw's eyes lit up.
Poolpaw felt her mother stiffen as the IceClan leader went on. "You and Featherpaw will go with the raiding party, but not to fight. You'll wait where it's safe, ready to carry messages or help with the wounded."
"Is that all?" Poolpaw's tail drooped.

"That's plenty!" Featherpaw nosed her way to her sister's side. "We'll do our best," she said to Silverstar. "Even if we can't fight."

Murmurs of approval rippled through the Clan.
"Imagine! Such a big message from just a sparrow!" Featherpaw purred. "Flowertail must be *so* clever to see it."

Flowertail had picked up the sparrow and was carrying it away through the tunnel. As Poolpaw watched the shadows swallow her, she looked up.
I hope she's right, for all our sakes.

Evening had fallen.
The dusk patrol went out as usual, just as hunting parties had come and gone during the afternoon, restocking the fresh-kill pile as though nothing had changed.

Poolpaw washed her paws beside the nursery. They were sore after an afternoon helping Swiftfur and Icefrost reinforce the walls. She glanced at the sky. Why hadn't the rain come? The clouds were as grey as a squirrel's pelt, but they seemed reluctant to give up their load.
Yet Owlpaw had promised rain, and Poolpaw couldn't help but believe the medicine-cat apprentice. She'd been busy all afternoon,

slipping in and out of camp, returning each time with a bundle of herbs. She was padding across the clearing now, her black pelt glistening in the twilight.

She hurried to meet her, catching up to her as she reached the tunnel. "Where's the rain?"
She dropped her bundle and turned her bright emerald gaze on her. "It'll come when it's ready," she told her.
"Before the battle?"
"I don't know." She bent down, ready to pick up her herbs.

"What are they for?" Poolpaw was reluctant to let her go, reassured by her calm presence.
"These will give the warriors strength," she told her. "Each cat will eat some before the battle."

"Have you eaten?" Owlpaw asked. Around the clearing, their Clanmates were settling down in knots, sharing prey and tongues.
"I'm not hungry," Poolpaw said stubbornly.
"Eat anyway," Owlpaw advised. "Our Clan needs you to be strong."

"Finnneeee." Poolpaw nodded, and she turned toward the fresh-kill pile. She chose a squirrel and carried it to where her denmates lay beside the rock pile.
Duskpaw and Bravepaw were absorbed in eating while Featherpaw was munching away into a mouse.

As Poolpaw layed down and took a bite out of her squirrel, she noticed Duskpaw's nervous expression. "I don't know what you're worrying about," she spoke. "You won't even be fighting."
Duskpaw stared at her, round-eyed. "Aren't you scared?"
"No DawnClan cat's going to beat me," she boasted.

Bravepaw gave out a purr. "I've been practicing my attack moves all day," he mewed. "We will win if I'm in the battle!"

Poolpaw was suddenly aware that she knew no battle moves at all. Perhaps she should learn one, just in case. She watched Briarfang on the far side of the clearing showing Springleaf how to roll and then jump with her forepaws extended in a vicious attack.
"Remember," he was telling her, "keep your claws sheathed until the

leap."
Springleaf tried to move again, sitting up afterward and looking pleased.
"Good." Briarfang nodded.

Poolpaw sighed, knowing Briarfang will be too busy to teach her a battle move. She took another bite and swallowed it. She nudged the squirrel away. How could she eat in this weather?

"Not hungry?" Silverstar's mew made her jump.
She stood at the pile of rocks and looked at the apprentices. "A good meal tonight will mean a good battle tomorrow."
Poolpaw lowered her gaze.

Silverstar's eyes glowed in the half-light. "I remember my first battle," she meowed. "Hopefall insisted I eat a mouse, but I hid it when her back was turned and then told her it was delicious."
"Really?" Poolpaw let out a small gasp of awe. She would of probably done worse than that!
"Really," she purred. "She didn't believe me, of course. All cats fear their first battle. But you.. you're different, you have no fear-scent."

"Do I still have to eat?" Poolpaw mewed.
"Not if you don't want to." Silverstar flicked her tail. "It's natural to be nervous or excited. But, only a frost-brain would rush into battle without fear." Was she glancing at Briarfang as she spoke? "But remember: You are IceClan cats, natural-born warriors. Trust your instincts. And we'll be fighting Clan cats, not loner or rouges. They won't go out of their way to harm youngsters like you."

Poolpaw stood up, fluffing out her fur. "We don't need special treatment."
Silverstar's whiskers twitched. "And you won't get any," she reassured her. "I'm relying on you two to stay alert and do exactly as you're told, as *soon* as you're told. Lives may depend on how quickly you act."
Poolpaw felt excitement surge through her again.
"But," Silverstar went on, "I know you'll do your best and StarClan will guide your paws." She glanced at Bravepaw and Duskpaw. "All of you."

Before they could answer she padded away, stopping beside Dawnstripe. The golden tabby she-cat sat hunched outside the nursery with Briarpool while their kits tumbled around them. The Clan's youngest members seemed to be the only cats unmoved by the looming battle. If anything, they were nosier than ever.

"If I were fighting tomorrow," Blackkit declared, "I'd get a DawnClan warrior like this." He hooked up the shrew he'd been eating. "And shred it." He tossed the half-eaten fresh-kill to the ground and pounced on it, claws unsheathed.
"Don't play with your food," Briarpool scolded. "It's disrespectful. That shrew died so that we may live."

Blackkit sat up, looking annoyed. "You just don't want me to become a warrior! You want me to stay a kit forever!"
Silverstar cuffed him playfully around the ear. "I doubt she'd be able to," she purred.

Blackkit looked up at the IceClan leader. "Can I come to the battle?"
Silverstar shook her head. "I need you to stay here and help defend the nursery."
Blackkit puffed out his chest. "No DawnClan cat'll make it past me."
"I believe you." Silverstar sounded calm.

As Poolpaw watched her reassure her Clanmates, she realized that all trace of the doubt she'd seen in her earlier was gone. She stood with her broad head high and her powerful shoulders stiff, as though already primed for battle.

She wondered how many lives she had left. Perhaps one of them was confidence. Why did only leaders get to have nine lives? Wouldn't it be more useful if StarClan granted every cat nine lives?

Whiteclaw and Raindapple padded from the tunnel, their eyes glowing in the half-light. Whiteclaw looked at his daughters. "You two should get to sleep early tonight." He reached Poolpaw and Featherpaw and touched each in turn lightly with his muzzle. Poolpaw could smell fear on his pelt, but his mew was unchanged. "I haven't seen your nests yet. Are they comfortable?"
"I wouldn't mind a bit more moss," Featherpaw mewed.
"I'll get some from mine." Raindapple padded quickly away toward

the warrior's den.

"Are you going to eat that?" Duskpaw was eyeing Poolpaw's squirrel.
Poolpaw shook her head and tossed it back to the light-brown tabby apprentice.
"You might as well have mine, too." Featherpaw added, flinging her mouse after.
Duskpaw licked her lips. "If you insist," she mewed. "I just hope the sound of your bellies rumbling doesn't wake me up in the night."

Poolpaw stood and stretched till her legs trembled. She nosed her way through the apprentice den's entrance and into the shelter of the den and began to paw at her nest.

Featherpaw followed her in. "Are you tired?"
Poolpaw shook her head. "I just don't like waiting for tomorrow. I wish it were morning already."
She gave her black paws a lick. The scent of the nursery was still on them, and she wished for a moment that she were safely back there with Raindapple and Whiteclaw and Dawnstripe and Briarpool and the kits. As she pushed the thought away, Whiteclaw slid in. He purred and nuzzled his daughter's heads.

Poolpaw looked up at her father. "Dad?"
"What is it, Poolpaw?"
"How many battles have you fought in?"
Whiteclaw thought for a moment. "Too many to count, though they were really just border fights—driving out intruders. This will be the first time I've fought on a Clan's territory."

"Are you nervous?" Featherpaw asked.
Poolpaw snorted. "Of course he's not nervous! He's a IceClan warrior."
Whiteclaw licked Featherpaw affectionally between the ears. "All warriors are nervous before battle—if not for themselves, then for their denmates and their whole Clan. It makes their senses sharper and their claws fiercer, and it gives them hunger for victory."

Raindapple had then came in, moss tucked under her chin and dangling from her jaws. She dropped half in Featherpaw's nest and

the other half in Poolpaw's. Quietly, she smoothed out each pile until both nests were soft with it.

Poolpaw sighed. "Thanks for the moss, mom."
Featherpaw was circling in hers. "It's so soft."

"It should keep you warm," Raindapple meowed.
"After the battle, we'll go out as a family and collect more and make sure both your nests are as soft as feathers," added Whiteclaw.
Poolpaw closed her eyes. She imagined herself padding through the snowy woods beside Raindapple, Whiteclaw and Featherpaw, the battle far behind and nothing to worry of but where to find the softest moss. The thought soothed her.

"We'll just lie down near you while you go to sleep." Whiteclaw settled on his belly near Poolpaw while Raindapple curled near Featherpaw.
Poolpaw could hear Featherpaw's breath slowing as Raindapple purred gently.
Rolling toward the warmth of her father, she felt Whiteclaw's soft belly fur brush her pelt.
Happily, she drifted to sleep.

Half blinking, she felt Whiteclaw stir and saw Raindapple and Whiteclaw got to their paws, she saw Duskpaw and Bravepaw asleep in their nests. It must be late.

Raindapple rubbed her head against Poolpaw. "Sleep well, little one." The warrior's breath stirred Poolpaw's ear fur.
Whiteclaw purred. "We will always be with you."

The dirt scraped and Raindapple and Whiteclaw were gone.

Chapter 10

Poolpaw woke up with excitement.
The battle!

She jumped up to her black paws and glanced around the den. Dawn had not yet come, but Duskpaw and Bravepaw were already sitting up and washing.

Featherpaw stretched in her nest, her eyes shining in the gloom. "What is it?"
"Bluefeather wants us in the clearing," Bravepaw mewed.

The wind roared above the camp and as Poolpaw pushed her way out of the den. The trees around the camp strained against the angry air, and clouds swept overhead as dark and threatening as crows.
Bluefeather was waiting outside the den, her fur flattened and her eyes half-closed. "Not good weather for battle."

"Clanmates!" Silverstar's call was sharp. She stood in the center of the clearing with Flowertail at her side and her warriors swarming around her, lashing their tails. The fur along Briarfang's spine stood as sharp as ice. Swiftfur grabbed some snow in her paws and dropped it back down.

Owlpaw was moving from one cat to another, dropping small furies of herbs at the paws of each.
Those must be the strengthening herbs, Poolpaw guessed.

Outside the nursery, Raindapple was sharing tongues with Briarpool. They paused as Blackkit and Thornkit tumbled out from the den, fluffing up their pelts and trying to look big. Briarpool gave Raindapple a final lick between the ears before scooping both kits, complaining, back into the nursery.

Poolpaw then saw Whiteclaw. Whiteclaw's eyes glittered as hard as crystals as he crossed the clearing. He had his ears flat and his pelt

slicked by the wind. He straightened his back and lifted his chin, vowing to be as much as Whiteclaw as she could.

Owlpaw dropped a few herbs at her paws. "You look like a warrior already."
Poolpaw purred at Owlpaw's praise. "I do?"
Icefrost narrowed her eyes. "Don't forget, stay out of the fighting."
Poolpaw turned her head to her mentor. "Can you teach us a battle move, just in case?"
Whiteclaw reached them. "You won't need any. You won't be fighting," he meowed firmly.

Owlpaw pawed some herbs toward her. "Eat these," she ordered. "They'll give you strength."
Poolpaw sniffed at her herbs and wrinkled her nose.
"They're bitter," she warned. "But the taste won't last long."
Poolpaw stuck out her tongue and lapped up the leaves as Featherpaw ate hers. She gagged when the dark, sour flavor hit the back of her throat, then closed her eyes and forced herself to swallow.

Silverstar yowled. "Flowertail has more news."
Raindapple's eyes widened. "*Another* omen?"

Flowertail nodded. "I examined the sparrow in the medicine clearing and found a shred of catmint underneath it's wing."
"Is she sure it didn't stick to its wing from the floor of her den?"
Bluefeather muttered under her breath. "It's not exactly spotless in there."
Poolpaw looked at her curiously. Surely Bluefeather didn't doubt the medicine cat as well?

Flowertail went on. "Yesterday you wanted more guidance from StarClan. Now you have it. Our warrior ancestors are telling us how to fight DawnClan's aggression."
"With a shred of catmint?" Whiteclaw's eyes were round.

"We must take the battle all the way into their camp," Flowertail announced.
"Their camp?" Bluefeather flattened her ears. "Do you know how dangerous that will be?"

"This is StarClan's advice, not mine," Flowertail countered. "The catmint tells me that the only way to defeat DawnClan is to destroy its medicine supply."
Icefrost stepped forward, her pelt bristling. "But that would endanger kits and elders. Every Clan depend on its medicine supply, especially with leaf-bare approaching. If we destroy that, we are attacking innocents as well as others." Outrage filled her mew.
Rainpelt nodded. "What kind of warriors would we be to pull such a fox-hearted trick?"
Flowertail lifted her chin. "We'd be alive."

Silverstar took a heavy step forward. "I agree that it seems harsh, but StarClan has warned us that we face destruction unless we act against DawnClan's aggression before it's too late. If we attack their medicine supply, they'll be weakened for moons. IceClan will be safe."

"But what if DawnClan suffers an outbreak of whitecough?" Owlpaw ventured. "How will Echofall treat the sick? The kits and elders would be defenseless."
Briarfang lashed his tail. "Would you sacrifice our own kits and elders to save theirs?" he demanded. "If we don't attack now, IceClan will be destroyed. Is it not worth risking a few DawnClan lives to save all of ours?"
Silverstar sighed. "Briarfang is right," she meowed. "We must follow StarClan's advice if we are to save ourselves."

"So we're attacking the camp?" Bluefeather growled.
"Our target is the medicine den. No kit or elder is to be harmed," Silverstar narrowed her eyes. "But their medicine supplies must be destroyed."

"Do you think the weather is a sign?" Featherpaw asked Whiteclaw.
"I think we've had enough signs for one day," Whiteclaw muttered.

Raindapple padded forward and looked at her children. "Promise me you'll steer clear of the fighting! There'll be time for being heroes when you're bigger and stronger and better trained." Her eyes blazed, and Featherpaw nodded.
"Poolpaw?"
Poolpaw sighed and dipped her head. "Okaaaay.."

"Not allowed in the fighting, eh?" Briarfang padded forward and flicked Poolpaw's ear with his tail-tip. "Next time, perhaps."

Whiteclaw flashed him a sharp look. "This is going to be a dangerous battle," he reminded him.
"We never attacked a Clan's camp before," Raindapple added. "We'll be fighting the whole Clan in a place they know and we don't."
Briarfang grinned. "But we'll have the element of surprise," he meowed. "And we'll fighting at close quarters."
"That's what worries us," Whiteclaw meowed.
"Up close, DawnClan's built will count for nothing. IceClan's strength will have the advantage."
Raindapple lowered her gaze. "I suppose."
"Don't worry," Briarfang meowed. "This is a battle we'll win."

"IceClan warriors! To me!"
Poolpaw's heart lurched in excitement as Silverstar yowled until her voice echoed off the trees. The IceClan leader flicked her tail in signal. "Let's go!"

Excitement crackled like lightning as the raiding party surged toward the tunnel. Poolpaw felt the breeze from their rushing pelts.
"Come on," Icefrost nudged Poolpaw forward.

Poolpaw glanced backward as she raced after her clanmates. There was just enough light to see Blackkit peer from the nursery, then disappear, his eyes flashing in anger as he was dragged back into the safety of the den.
Stormclaw sat beside Swiftwing while Duskpaw and Speckledall paced the white clearing. Ashfall and Crowclaw were climbing into Highrock—ears pricked, pelts ruffled—and Flowertail was disappearing into the shadows beyond the tunnel.

"Flowertail's not coming!" Featherpaw gasped, catching up with Poolpaw.
"I guess she needs to stay in her den, preparing for any wounded cats," Poolpaw guessed.
"But *she* told us to attack," Featherpaw persisted.
Poolpaw rolled her eyes. *She's a medicine cat!*

"Hurry!" Icefrost ran at Poolpaw's heels, pushing her pace.

The rest of the patrol was already charging for the bottom of the ravine. Poolpaw felt a prickle of worry. Could she climb the steep slope, with the wind howling around for rocks?

She followed Bravepaw up the first tumble of stone, feeling Icefrost pressed behind her. She wouldn't let her slip. Claws unsheathed, she clambered upward, following the stream of cats that passed like shadows over the stones.

Owlpaw's herbs were working. Her muscles felt strong, and each jump seemed to take her farther than she anticipated.
Her heart was racing with excitement. She could sense the anticipation of her Clanmates. Today a great victory would be won! Upward she pushed, until with a final bound she leaped to the top of the ravine. Without pausing for breath, she pelted into the snowy woods.

Snowed-tree trunks blurred around her as Poolpaw ran with her Clan, weaving around bushes in the predawn light. Poolpaw could make out the white fur of Snowheart's coat ahead as it flashed among the trees. Icefrost's fur was pale in the half-light, while Briarfang and Bravepaw blended in with the shadows, visible only by their movement.

"Stream ahead," Whiteclaw warned.
The cats slowed, bunching, before leaping the glittering water one at a time and racing away through the snow. Poolpaw tensed as her turn neared. *My legs aren't long enough.* She teered at the edge while Raindapple leaped across; the pale-white-dappled landed delicately on the far side and turned to look back.

"It's not deep!" She encouraged, her mew almost drowned out by the sound of the wind.
"But it's wet!" Poolpaw wailed.

Featherpaw fidgeted beside her.
Icefrosr nudged Poolpaw from behind, "Go on," she urged. "You'll make it."

Poolpaw focussed on the far bank and took a deep breath. Screwing up her muscles, she leaped. Icefrost gave her a helpful shove with

her muzzle, and Poolpaw stretched out on her forepaws, managing the grasp the far bank and scramble up beside Raindapple.

Featherpaw was hunched on the other bank, eyes wide as she prepared to jump.
"You can do it!" Poolpaw called.
"I'm coming!" Featherpaw jumped, but her graceful leap turned into a clumsy flop as her hind paws skidded on soft snow and she splashed belly-first into the stream.
"Mouse dung!" Featherpaw struggled to her paws with the water rushing around her legs, then scrambled out.
Poolpaw ducked as Featherpaw shook the freezing water from her pelt.
"Bad luck." Icefrost landed lightly behind them.

"Hurry!" Raindapple commanded. Their Clanmates had disappeared into the forest.

Only Whiteclaw had waited. He was peering from the bushes ahead. "I was worried about you!" he meowed as they caught up. He saw Featherpaw's wet pelt and stepped and rubbed his head against hers. "Running will warm you up," he told her before speeding off again.

Poolpaw fought to catch her breath as they pelted onward. At least she wasn't soaked to the skin. Poor Featherpaw looked like a drowned rat bounding alongside her. The cold wind was beginning to fluff up her fur.

At last they spotted their Clanmates ahead. They had slowed and were trekking in a single file. The snowy trees had thinned out and beyond them Poolpaw saw a smooth, wide path snaking through the woods, glimmering with shining shadows. On the other side, Poolpaw could see grass and green trees and bushes.
The DawnClan border!

They caught up and tagged at the end of the patrol. The river was huge, as wide as IceClan camp, stretching endlessly in each direction. So much water, rolling and tumbling, almost black as it swirled between the banks.

This should be ours! She thought fiercely.
You're not fighting for Icerocks, she told herself. *You're fighting for medicine supplies.*

Poolpaw's heart quickened. "Will any DawnClan patrol see us?" Her gaze deepened into the trees, expecting a patrol to come out and attack.
"Too early." Icefrost sounded confident, but she didn't look at her and wondered if she was just trying to calm her.

Poolpaw took a deep breath and took a step into the water, soon relaxed by how cold it was. She started paddling carefully towards the other side and reached it.

DawnClan territory..
She thought as she followed her clanmates into the woods. She was surprised how she didn't see a drop of snow. The grass under her paws made her paws feel uncomfortable, there was no softness in the grass at all! It was straw-like, emerald-green, wavy, and worst of all, warm.
Her breath caught in her throat as the storm howled around them.

They padded onward, trees stretching across the territory.
Ahead, they could see a circle of brambles and a few paw-steps near it was a gorse tunnel similar to the tunnel to IceClan's camp.
"DawnClan's camp," Icefrost breathed into her ear.

Silverstar was heading toward them. "You see that rock over there?" The IceClan leader meowed, nodding toward a boulder nearby, nearly as big as Highrock. "That's where you'll wait." Her gaze flicked from Poolpaw to Featherpaw. "Do you undersrand?"
They both nodded.

"Swiftfur will wait with you." Silverstar glanced back over her shoulder. "I'll send a runner if we get into trouble. Follow their orders exactly and without question."

Blood roared in Poolpaw's ears, blocking the howling of the wind.
This was it.
The battle was about to begin.

She followed Swiftfur, her paws leading her to the boulder Silverstar had indicated. It was smooth at one end as though it had been rubbed away at the end.

When Featherpaw reached the boulder as well, she looked at Featherpaw. "Do you think she'll send for us?"
Featherpaw shrugged.

She then realized something. *We didn't wish good luck to Whiteclaw and Raindapple.* She hadn't even *looked* at them! Poolpaw darted from behind the rock, desperate to her parent's eyes once more, to know that everything would be fine, but the cats had disappeared.

"Get back here!" Swiftfur's mew was fierce, and Poolpaw felt a tug on her tail.
"But I just wanted to say—!" Poolpaw tried to defend herself.
"This is a battle," Swiftfur growled. "You follow orders."
Poolpaw stared at her black paws.
Swiftfur sighed, her tone softening as she spoke again. "It's for your own safety and the safety of your Clan."

They waited wordlessly as the air grew lighter. A bird flew past the trees and struggled against the wind. The DawnClan cats would be rising now, stirring from their dens, unaware of the fury about to be unleashed on them.
DawnClan must be beaten if IceClan was to survive. This was a battle that had to be fought.

The thought roused her spirits, and she lifted her chin. Remembering that time when she was with Flowertail and learned how to gather moss, she took a few swipes in the air, imagining she was fighting a DawnClan warrior.
Featherpaw broke into a purr. "You look like you're gathering cobweb!"
"See if you can do better!" Poolpaw challenged.

"Hush!" Swiftfur commanded. The black-and-white warrior was straining hard to listen above the wind. The rain fell harder on Poolpaw's soft pelt.

A screech of warning suddenly ripped the air, and the forest seemed

to explode with furious yowls and screams that rose above the wind. Poolpaw's eyes widened as shock pulsed through her. She suddenly didn't want to be in the battle anymore..
She recognized the aggressive screech of Briarfang and the agonized wail of Ravenbird.

Reality hit her like a savage gust of wind.
Down there in the camp, blood was flowing. Warriors fought warriors with claws unsheathed and teeth bared. Poolpaw stared at Featherpaw.
Her littermate's fur was on end, her ears stretched to hear every sound. "Was that Bluefeather?" She breathed as a furious howl carried over the wind.
Another hideous screech came in reply.
Poolpaw began to shake. It sounded like Icefrost. Was she attacking or trying to defend herself?
Screech after screech rent the stormy air until Poolpaw felt sick from the sound.

"Can't we do anything?" She pleaded with Swiftfur.
"We must wait," Swiftfur answered darkly.

The warrior jerked her head as paws pounded toward them.
Poolpaw spun, expecting to see a DawnClan patrol skid around the corner. She readied herself to face them, hackles raised.
But it was Snowheart.

"Come, quickly!" she hissed.
"Bravepaw's been wounded!"

Chapter 11

[image] [image]

Swiftfur stiffened, her ears flat. "Bravepaw?"
"Claw wound," Snowheart told her. "Bleeding badly. He needs to be taken away, and we can't spare any of the fighting warriors."
Swiftfur nodded, and her round gaze hardened. "Come with us," she ordered Poolpaw.

"What about me?" Featherpaw offered, eyes shining.
"One apprentice will be enough." Swiftfur flashed Featherpaw a look that she did not argue with. Featherpaw backed away, dipping her head.

"Stay close," Swiftfur told Poolpaw. She darted from the rock after Snowheart, out into the lashing rain.
Poolpaw screwed up on her eyes and kept as close as Swiftfur's flank as she could, feeling for her with her whiskers and pelt when the rain blinded her. The grass was slippery under her paws, and her tail was whipped up over her back by the wind.

Without warning, Swiftfur halted. Poolpaw slithered to a stop beside her.
Blinking, she saw the ground drop away in front of her. In front of them, was a circle of brambles, and underneath them led to a gorse tunnel. The scents were stronger now, and Poolpaw knew that this must be DawnClan's camp.

Her eyes stretching wide in horror, Poolpaw watched as the battle raged. Screeches and yowls ripped through the howling wind. Blood stained the ground and frothed in red puddles, lathered by the rain. Fur, heavy with flesh, flew in clumps and snagged in brambles. Poolpaw narrowed her eyes, trying to pick out which cat was which among her clanmates.

There! Briarfang was thrushing a DawnClan cat from him with flailing hind legs, only to be set upon by two more warriors; his claws shone and his teeth were bared. He twisted suddenly to

protect his belly, fending off one warrior with a shove of his massive shoulders; but the other one clung to him, and Briarfang howled as the warrior's claws ripped hunks of fur from his pelt.
On the other side of the clearing, Icefrost and Bluefeather were fighting side by side with their backs to the brambles. They slashed and sliced at the four DawnClan cats who came at them in a vicious assault, raking the IceClan warriors's muzzles, snapping at their legs till the ground around them ran red.
Springleaf screeched as two DawnClan cats dived on her, their eyes wild. Her shriek made Briarfang's ears prick and he kicked off the DawnClan warriors and raced to help his Clanmate.
Briarfang pushed one warrior away with his shoulder, flipping him to the side, before sinking his teeth into the sodden tabby pelt of the other. The tabby let out an agonized shriek that pierced Poolpaw's belly.

"Come on!" Swiftfur's sharp order shook Poolpaw out of her frozen horror, and she skidded after her clanmate and plunged through the gorse tunnel.

She burst into the clearing after Swiftfur and raced to where Bravepaw lay.
A long wound stretched along the apprentice's flank, showing bright pink flesh beneath his brown tabby fur.

Swiftfur grasped Bravepaw by the scruff and began to drag her kit across the clearing toward the gorse tunnel.
Poolpaw tried to help, nudging Bravepaw along with her nose, but Bravepaw kicked out.
"I can walk!" He gasped, twisting and clawing at the ground.
Swiftfur let him find his paws, but as soon as she let go of her kit's scruff, Bravepaw collasped, his legs too shaky to hold him.
Swiftfur grabbed him again, and Bravepaw staggered toward the edge of the clearing.
Poolpaw followed, her nose filled with the scent of blood and fear and torn fur.

"IceClan brought kits!" A dark-reddish brown DawnClan warrior was staring at Poolpaw.

Poolpaw stopped and growled at the warrior. "I'm *not* a kit!"

The DawnClan warrior advanced on her, his eyes gleaming. "Then show me your battle moves, young warrior."

Fear shot through her. She didn't know any! She'd been an apprentice for only four sunrises! She fought the urge to back away. The warrior grinned. "I'll get the pleasure of striking first!" He raised his sharp, talon claws, glimmering in the rain.

Poolpaw's face paled. She was about to die..

"Acornstep!" A voice rang across the clearing.
Poolpaw recognized Gorsefur, Sunpaw's mentor. He was at the center of the fighting, with fur bristling and emerald eyes wide. His fierce gaze was fixed on the dark brown warrior. "I need your fighting off these warriors!"
Acornstep snarled at Poolpaw. "Looks like you're going to have to wait a little longer for your first battle scar," he sneered before turning away.

"Poolpaw!" Swiftfur called from the gorse tunnel. Poolpaw padded forward as Swiftfur guided her up the gorse tunnel and out of camp.

Swiftfur had stopped to catch her breath and let Bravepaw rest while she sniffed at her wound. "It's just a shallow wound and torn fur," Swiftfur meowed, relief flooding her meow.

Featherpaw bounded across the grass towards them, her pelt slicked by the rain. "I know! Flowertail taught me a few herbs!"
She paced back to where she was and came back with a wad of cobweb in her teeth and stretched it over Bravepaw's wound with careful claws.

Poolpaw glanced back at the battle still raging below. She could see a few glimpses of the clearing.
Briarfang and Springleaf were fighting side by side now.
Ravenbird and Snowheart had joined up as well, lashing out with their paws in perfect time with each other.

Were the DawnClan cats so ferocious that IceClan warriors couldn't face them alone?

Where was Raindapple?
Poolpaw's blood chilled. She hadn't seen her mother—not even once.

While her sister pad Bravepaw's wound, Poolpaw gazed down at the clearing.
Her fur felt cold and prickly: Something was wrong.

She spotted Sunpaw heading for a den made out of ferns. *That must be the medicine den.*
Raindapple had come out, and to her surprise saw Sunpaw and bolted out of the medicine den and out of the gorse tunnel and Sunpaw came chase, and Poolpaw could see that behind Sunpaw, Whiteclaw was giving chase to them.

Poolpaw panicked.
She rushed to Featherpaw and whispered into her ear, "I need to leave post."
Featherpaw whipped her head to Poolpaw in shock, "You can't! We're not allowed to!"
"Please!" Poolpaw said desperately.
"But—!" Featherpaw started.
"Mom and Dad are in danger," she gave Featherpaw a meaningful look.
Featherpaw's ears flattened and she nodded slowly. "I'll stall as long as I can.."
Poolpaw smiled softly, "Thank you..." and she bolted into the forest.

Her black paws raced through the leaves, the grass slippery and wet. *Come on, come on...*
She looked left and right frantically, searching for any clumps of fur. *Where did they go?*
She begged StarClan for Sunpaw to not harm her parents..

She then halted, hearing a yowling from the right and turned, following the sound.
She then reached brambles of bushes and furled into them, and her eyes went up in horror.
Raindapple was pinned down by Sunpaw and her claws was unsheathed.
Poolpaw frantically looked left and right. *Where is Whiteclaw?*

Sunpaw glared down at Raindapple, "What did you do."
Her hiss turned into a snarl. "TELL ME WHAT YOU DID."
"I did what I had to do! I destroyed your herbs!" Raindapple spat.

Sunpaw grabbed her by the scruff of the neck and threw her across the clearing, tossing her body like it was nothing. Raindapple's body hit a tree and she lurched horribly.
No! Stop!

Sunpaw stalked towards the warrior, "You...did...what?" A low menacing growl escaped the apprentice. She raised her head, "Do you feel nothing? You disgusting piece of roadkill?"

Poolpaw's eyes went in horror. This wasn't the Sunpaw she knew.. Sunpaw was brutal, ruthless cat..

"MURDERER!" Yowled a cry of agony as Whiteclaw leaped from the bushes and launched himself at Sunpaw.
Sunpaw didn't flinch as she jumped and raised her claws and swiped at his muzzle, landing softly on the grass.
Whiteclaw yowled in pain as he crashed into the ground.
Whiteclaw spun around, hissing, and lunged forward at Sunpaw.
Sunpaw threw herself forward, sinking her claws into his stomach before twisting and rolling away from him.
Whiteclaw crash-landed into the ground, blood started leaking from his stomach and effecting the grass below him.

Art drawn by xviioletcreme
NOOOOOOOOO! Poolpaw wanted to scream.

Sunpaw stared at the bodies in horror for a moment then dropped her head. She took a deep breath and she ran towards the way to DawnClan camp.

Once she was gone, Poolpaw burst through the bushes, heading toward her parents's side. "Mom! Dad!"
She heard a mighty yowl from the trees, "IceClan! Retreat!"
Thank, StarClan!

She nudged Raindapple. "Raindapple! Raindapple!" She nudged her mother with her nose, waiting for her limp to push back. But

Raindapple only flopped backward.

Poolpaw ignored the tears that flowed from her cheek and she went towards her father, who had their eyes half-open. "Whiteclaw! It's me, Poolpaw!" She hoped to see them with recognition, but they were dull, filled with clouds that scudded across the sky.

"Poolpaw." Silverstar's soft mew sounded over her shoulder and looked up at her.
Poolpaw didn't even ask how she got here. "Why won't they get up?" Poolpaw wailed.
Silverstar shook her head. "They're dead, Poolpaw."
"They can't be!" Poolpaw twisted back to her father, pressing her paws to his flanks and shaking him. "They can't be dead. We were fighting warriors, not rouges or loners. Warriors don't kill without reason!"

She then went towards her mother.
They couldn't be dead. The young apprentice began nudging her with her muzzle. "Wake up!" she begged. "It was all a mistake. You don't have to be dead."

Silverstar sighed and flicked her tail, and Swiftfur padded to the clearing.
She felt Swiftfur's gentle paw.
She and Silverstar then had grabbed Raindapple and Whiteclaw's scruffs and padded forward and took them into a clearing.
Poolpaw finally her spreading tears fall. *Come back! You guys were going to take us into the woods to get moss for our nests! You promised!*

"Raindapple? Whiteclaw?" Featherpaw's frightened mew sounded from one of the bushes as half her body was peering out of the bush.
She ran began to lap at Raindapple and Whiteclaw's pelts.
"Are they badly hurt?" she asked between licks.

Poolpaw stared blankly back at her sister. "They're dead," she whispered.
"No!" Featherpaw's wail ended in a whimper as her paws crumbled beneath her.
"They promised they wouldn't leave us," Featherpaw wailed.

"It's okay," Poolpaw lied, summoning up every shred of strength she could find. "I'll take care of you now."
Featherpaw flashed her an angry glance. "I don't need taking care of. I need Whiteclaw and Raindapple!" She leaped to her paws and diving after Silverstar.

Poolpaw watched her go. *I'll take care of you anyway,* she vowed. She waited for her heart to twist with more pain, but she felt nothing. Determination surged through her. She would take care of Featherpaw, and she would take care of her Clan. She would never lose another cat that she cared for, not like this.
She got to her black paws and followed her clanmates, her heart thumping dully in her chest.

The rain eased as they crossed the river and Poolpaw felt the familiar snow beneath her paws. As the shattered Clan passed beneath the snowy trees, the wind dropped and the branches fell still.
Was the silent sent by StarClan? Was it disapproval, a condemnation of the attack? *Are they mourning Whiteclaw and Raindapple?*
Poolpaw stared up through the snowy branches. Suddenly she felt loneliness like frost in her heart. She hunched her shoulders and padded after her Clanmates toward home.

Bravepaw was limping, but the cobwebs had staunched her bleeding. Springleaf leaned on Briarfang, and his gaze never left her.
Snowheart, BladeWing, Ravenbird and Silverstar were helping caring the bodies of Raindapple and Whiteclaw.

Featherpaw trailed along, her tail trailing along the ground. Poolpaw wondered whether to catch up to her, but she couldn't think of anything to say that might make them either of them feel better.

Icefrost halted and looked back; her eyes met hers, brimming with sympathy. She said nothing but waited for her to catch up, then fell in beside her, padding close enough to share her warmth.
They were in silence as they followed the trail back to camp and came out of the tunnel.

By the time Poolpaw entered the clearing, Crowclaw and Ashfall were circling their battered and injured Clanmates, pelts bristling with alarm. Dawnstripe came running from the nursery and greeted Snowheart with a worried mew, sniffing her pelt to check her injuries.

Flowertail padded from the medicine den, yawning. "How'd it go?"
Her eyes widened in surprise as Silverstar laid the bodies of Raindapple and Whiteclaw in front of her and stepped back.
"I don't know if Raindapple managed to destroy their supplies before she died," she growled.
Flowertail opened her mouth but no words came out.

"You killed her!" Swiftfur's screech took Poolpaw by surprise, and she flinched as the she-cat lunged at Flowertail and knocked her to the ground, hissing in her face. "This time one of your ridiculous omens has killed your Clanmates!"
"Stop!" Silverstar called.
But Swiftfur had already raised her paw, claws unsheathed. Hawkflame and Rainpelt streaked from the clearing and dragged Swiftfur off the shocked medicine cat. They held her back as Flowertail scrambled to her paws and shook out her pelt.

Swiftwing and Stormclaw had ventured from the elders's den.
"You lost?" Swiftwing sounded as though she could hardly believe her eyes.
Silverstar nodded. "We had to retreat... and Whiteclaw and Raindapple are dead."

A wail of grief came from outside the nursery. Briarpool raced to Raindapple's body and crouched over her, burying her nose in her pelt.
"What's wrong?" Blackkit and Icekit came scampering after her, slithering to a halt when they saw their mother grieving over Raindapple's lifeless body.

Icekit turned her big, round eyes on Poolpaw. "Is she really...dead?" she breathed.
Poolpaw stared back, words stuck in her throat. She glanced at Featherpaw, but her sister was staring at the ground.

Icefrost stepped forward and glared at Flowertail. "We should never have been sent into battle!"
"I was only interpreting the signs from StarClan." Flowertail defended herself calmly.

"Perhaps you should learn to interpret weather rather than prey," Briarpool pushed ahead of Silverstar to join Icefrost. "Would StarClan have blessed a battle with a storm like that?"
Icefrost narrowed her eyes, her gaze flicking to Briarfang. "Perhaps Flowertail was more eager to satisfy her Clanmates's wishes than those of StarClan."

Silverstar shouldered her way to the front. "Enough!" she growled. "Flowertail is not to blame for our defeat. All warriors risk their lives for the sake of the Clan. It's part of the warrior code. Our wounded need attention. Arguing won't help them!"

Owlpaw hurried forward. "I'll get more supplies." She disappeared down the tunnel, followed quickly by Flowertail.
"You can hide from your Clanmates," Swiftfur muttered under her breath. "It'll be StarClan who judges you."

As the wounded cats limped to the medicine clearing, Dawnstripe, Briarpool, Crowclaw and Briarfang led the warriors bodies toward the middle in the clearing and started licking their pelts. Stormclaw and Swiftwing joined them, tucking Whiteclaw's under him and lapping his pelt.

"Will you sit vigil?" Ashfall's soft mew roused Poolpaw from her grief-stricken trance.

The warriors, queens and elders finished their task and Whiteclaw and Raindapple's bodies lay in the center of the clearing, as sleek and peaceful as if they were only sleeping. The rain clouds were cleaning now, and the sun rested on the tops of the snowy trees, turning them pink. Raindapple's pelt turned silver while Whiteclaw's turned dark gray.

With a pang of grief so strong she had to fight her breath, Poolpaw remembered the first time she'd opened her eyes and been startled by her mother's beauty, and how she was amazing by how cool-

looking her father was. How she wished she were back in her nest now, curling near Raindapple and Whiteclaw and hearing their steady breathing, waiting for them to wake up.

"Will you sit vigil?" Ashfall repeated.
Poolpaw snapped. "Why did you have to make them asleep! They're dead!" She stared at Featherpaw, but Featherpaw's eyes were dull with grief.

Icefrost padded from the shadows beneath Highrock and laid her tail on Poolpaw's shoulders. "No one's trying to pretend they're still alive. They now walk together in StarClan. But they're still watching you, as closely as they ever did. They'll never leave you, Poolpaw."
Poolpaw wretched herself away from her. "They *have* left me. I don't *want* them to be in StarClan. I want them to be *here,* where I can see them and talk to them."
Icefrost gazed steadily at her. "You'll see them in your dreams, I promise."

Stifling the wail that rose in her throat, Poolpaw crouched beside her parents's bodies. Featherpaw joined her, nestling so close their pelts touched.
Together they pressed their noses into their parents's fur.
The shadows lengthened around them as one by one her Clanmates joined the vigil. Poolpaw sensed the warmness of their bodies, even more noticeable next to the coldness of her parents.
She pressed her muzzle harder against her father's flank, wishing she could find a little remaining warmth in his fur. But her parents were as cold as earth.

That night, she was in a familiar forest she hadn't been in a while.
She recognized the tall, dark grey trees and the starless sky.
As she looked forward, she was also face to face with another familiar cat.

"Greetings, Poolpaw," Darkfrost sneered. "I assume you now know who has betrayed you?"
Poolpaw nodded, immediantky knowing. "Sunpaw.."
Darkfrost purred and trodded forward and wrapped her tail around Poolpaw. "I pity you.. I too have felt pain in my heart. But I know something that secretly lurks in your heart."

Poolpaw flicked her ear, confused. "What?"

"Revenge."

Poolpaw was about to deny it, but.. she couldn't help the feeling of wanting her cold revenge on Sunpaw.
Darkfrost continued, "I can help you get what you want.. I can teach you to become a better warrior than everyone else. You'll be praised from your Clan with my teachings.."

Poolpaw listened carefully. But then she halted. She didn't want to spend more and more moons training of being a warrior. "Can you tell me the quickest way..?"
Darkfrost purred, "Very well." She then unsheathed her claws, "First, you need to unsheath your claws and pin them onto the their neck, making them unable to get away, and then, once your ready for your revenge.. slash through their throat!"
Poolpaw grinned, imagining the image. She dipped her head, "Thank you. Will I ever see you again?"
Darkfrost nodded. "Of course, whenever you are needed of help, I'll be here."

Poolpaw then woke up with a jolt.
She was now back into the apprentice, Featherpaw and Duskpaw sleeping peacefully. Bravepaw had to sleep in the medicine den for a few days.
Poolpaw remembered the night before where Raindapple and Whiteclaw huddled near their kits, promising them they would go out as a family and collect moss for their nests.

You said you would always be here with me. Why did you have to die?

Chapter 12

Fox dung!
The squirrel had been too quick for her and was already climbing up the treetops, sending flurries of snow showering onto the hunting patrol.

Icefrost purred. "Don't worry, squirrels are always going to be faster in thick snow because it supports their weight."
Well, obviously! Poolpaw thought. *If I'd stalked that squirrel better I would have caught it.*

It was the only sniff of prey they'd had all morning, and she'd let it get away. As she dropped backward into the thickly piled snow around the tree's roots, Featherpaw's mew rang through the muffled forest.

"I know how we can get the prey out of their burrows!"
"By calling to them?" Poolpaw mewed sarcastically. Hadn't her sister learned to keep her voice low yet?
"How?" Bluefeather beckoned her apprentice closer, and Featherpaw lolloped like a hare through the snow to his side, her belly leaving a trail in the soft white powder.

Thornpaw leaped up onto the root beside Poolpaw. He'd been an apprentice for only half a moon, but he was already as big as her and had the typical cockiness of a fresh' paw. He had gotten Swiftfur as his mentor and caught two mice and never seen battle. Poolpaw hunched her shoulders as he settled next to her. Couldn't he sit next to his mentor and leave her in peace?

"I wonder what her idea is?" Thornpaw mewed.
"Who cares?" Poolpaw stiffened. "She's probably scared all the prey around here back into their burrows already."
"Don't be grumpy." Thornpaw nudged her gently. "Featherpaw has good ideas."

Poolpaw rubbed her nose with her black paw. "Maybe she thinks if

she shouts loud enough, every mouse and bird in the forest will come out to see what the noise is."
Thornpaw ignored her. "I love the snow," he murmured, staring into the trees. "Everything looks so clean and bright."
So do I, "You love *everything,*" Poolpaw growled, letting her bad temper flow freely as she slid off the root and sank into the deep drift below.
The snow gets bigger, more freezing, and makes things hard to hunt in Leaf-bare, but it was better than listening to Thornpaw.

He was always cheerful! Ever since he'd move into the apprentices's den, it had been impossible to get any sleep. He was always joking and teasing and messing around with the others. Blackpaw, Icepaw, and Amberpaw never stopped purring and fidgeting when Thornpaw was in the den. Blackpaw had gotten Briarfang, Icepaw gotten Ravenbird, and Amberpaw got Rainpelt.

Even Featherpaw seemed happier.
Traitor.
Had she forgotten Raindapple and Whiteclaw?

Poolpaw envied Bravepaw and Duskpaw. They were warriors now —Braveheart and Duskwing—and they slept in peace and quiet in the warriors's den.
Warriors didn't think it was funny to hide a beetle in a denmate's nest, didn't try to wake a denmate up to see how pretty the moon looked.
Lucky Braveheart and Duskwing.

Poolpaw struggled out of the drift, wishing her legs were long enough to keep her belly fur from dragging in the snow. She shook the snow from her whiskers. "What's the plan?"
Featherpaw's eyes were bright. "I thought we could leave some nuts or seeds on a tree root to draw the prey out."

Poolpaw rolled her eyes. "Did you bring nuts with you?"
Featherpaw shook her head. "Not *this* time. But I know Flowertail keeps cob nuts for making ointments. We could bring some next time and—!"
Poolpaw cut her off. "Like she's going to let you use her precious supplies for hunting."

"We'd only need a few," Featherpaw pointed out. "And the prey would never get to eat them because we'd catch it first."

Bluefeather was nodding slowly. "I think it's a clever idea."
Icefrost tipped her head on one side. "I really think it might work."

Poolpaw scowled at her mentor. "I suppose you think she'd have caught that squirrel." She bounded away through the snow.
"Leaf-bare hunting's never easy for any cat!" Icefrost called after her.
Poolpaw ignored her.
"Sorry," she heard Featherpaw meow. "She's in one of her moods."
How dare Featherpaw apologize for her? *She's not my parent!*

Poolpaw shouldered her way into a swath of brackens, shaking loose its thick covering snow.
A narrow trail tunneled through the stems, and she followed it.

She could the smell the cold, stale scent of fox and guessed with a glint of satisfaction that their paws had beaten this track. She could see fox-prints deep into the snow. Icefrost had told her that fox-prints were diamond shaped and narrow, and they were just that. The thought of bumping into a fox made her claws itch. She could do with a good fight.

She's in one of her moods. Poolpaw lashed her tail as Featherpaw's words echoed in her ears.
She stomped farther into the bracken, trying to ignore the guilt prickling at her pelt.
It wasn't Featherpaw's fault she felt so angry.

Every morning since Whiteclaw and Raindapple died, Poolpaw woke with the same hollow sadness opening like an old wound in her belly.
It should be her *mother* teaching her to recognize tracks. It should be her *father* who should be helping her with hunting, not Icefrost. If Raindapple and Whiteclaw were still alive, they could help Poolpaw to learn how to hunt so that she didn't appear so stupid in front of her denmates. Why *aren't* they there?

She heard pawsteps behind her, and twisted her head to see Icefrost. "Where are the others?" she asked.

"I sent them back to camp," Icefrost told her. "It's getting late."
Poolpaw turned her black paws toward home.
"Wait!" Icefrost's mew halted her. She was beckoning her with her tail toward a root of a birch. "I want to talk to you." She swept the snow from the root with a paw, then jumped up and cleared another space beside her. "We're not going back to camp till you tell me what's going on."

Poolpaw scraped her claws mutinously along the bark, silvery and smooth amid the fluffy snow.
She didn't want to talk to Icefrost. She didn't want to talk to anyone. She just wanted to go home and curl up in her nest, away from the snow and the cold and her Clanmates.
"There's nothing wrong," she mewed tightly. "I'm just cold and hungry."
"We're all cold and hungry," Icefrost's pale blue gaze didn't stray from hers. "It doesn't give us the right to be rude or reckless."
Poolpaw looked away with a shrug.

"Now, sit down and tell me what's wrong!"
Reluctantly Poolpaw clambered up beside her. The exposed root felt cold and damp as she sat down. "I'm just having a bad day, that's all."
"It seems like every day's a bad day with you."
Shut up! Shut up!
"It's leaf-bare," she began.
Duh!

"We have to do our best to provide for the Clan. But as far as I can tell, you're not even trying. You act like everything's a chore; you scrape through your assessments, though I know you can do better. Sometimes I feel like I'm wasting my time trying to teach you. You're so bad-tempered with your Clanmates, they're starting to avoid you. And now, when every cat needs to try their hardest, you hunt as though your mind's filled with starling feathers and your paws are made of stone."
Her words stung like nettles, and Poolpaw found herself shrinking inside her pelt as she went on.

"Why should your Clanmates look after you if you won't do the same for them?"

Her eyes began to prick. "I—I..." Her voice choked and she finished weakly, "Everything's gone wrong."
There was a heavy pause. She looked up and she felt Icefrost's tail stroke her flank.

"You miss Whiteclaw and Raindapple," she meowed. "Of course you do. But they died defending their Clan."
"*Defending?*" Poolpaw bristled. "We were *attacking,* now defending!"
"Only to save our territory."

"Are you sure?" Poolpaw glared at her. *Had StarClan really wanted them to fight?*
Icefrost met her gaze, unblinking. "Did you believe we were defending IceClan territory as we headed for battle?" she asked.
Poolpaw paused, remembering, then nodded.

"So did every cat on that patrol." Icefrost glanced at the ground. "We thought we were doing as StarClan wanted. We may have been right. We may have been wrong. But fighting for our Clan is part of the warrior code. Whatever doubts we have, we must not doubt the warrior code. The forest and our Clanmates may change around us, but the warrior code remains the same."
Poolpaw breathed out slowly as Icefrost continued.

"Raindapple and Whiteclaw *knew* that. They fought bravely and died bravely." Icefrost flicked her gaze back at Poolpaw. "Warriors die in battle. It's a fact. But they do not leave us. They join StarClan, where they find old friends and kin, and there they watch over us."
Poolpaw glanced through the branches at the darkening sky. Silverpelt would be out soon. Was Raindapple and Whiteclaw really there, watching? Her heart ached with wanting to believe it was true.

"Raindapple and Whiteclaw want you to be brave, like they were," Icefrost meowed. "To do your duty, just as they did."
How do you know? A flash of fury flashed over Poolpaw. "You think they want us to die like they did? For nothing?"
Icefrost thrashed her tail, sweeping the snow from behind her. "Dying for your Clan is *not* nothing!"

Poolpaw dug her claws into the bark as Icefrost took a deep breath.

"I wish Whiteclaw was still alive, too," she murmured, with a sadness that took Poolpaw by surprise.
She then remembered how the elders told her that Whiteclaw and Icefrost were littermates.
Then she stood up and shook the snow from her tail. "But he's not, and you can't grieve forever. Your Clan needs you. Concentrate more on your training." Her mew was brisk as she leaped down from the tree root. "It'll give you something else to think about."

I don't want to think about anything else! Whiteclaw and Raindapple are not a thorn in my paw to be plucked out and forgotten! Poolpaw jumped down from the root, her black paws numb for sitting so long she landed clumsily.

Icefrost glanced around at her. "Are you okay?"
"Of course!" She straightened up. She'd show her. She'd be the best apprentice she ever saw. But she wouldn't forget Raindapple and Whiteclaw.

Poolpaw followed her down the ravine and along the path to the tunnel. As they padded into camp, the familiarity of her home soothed Poolpaw. The clearing felt sheltered, shielded from the overlapping snow, and after the walk though thr woods she could feel her paws again.

Maybe Icefrost was right. Maybe Whiteclaw and Raindapple *was* watching her from StarClan, willing her to be the best and bravest warrior. She'd make them proud. She'd be just as brave, just as loyal, and just a willing to die for what she believed.

For the first time in moons, some of the weight in Poolpaw's heart lifted. She took a deep breath and felt the freezing icy air sear her lungs, reminding her this was leaf-bare, when her Clan needed her the most.

Chapter 13

[image]

Sun sparkled on the snow piled at the edge of the camp.
Poolpaw blinked against the brightness, her head fuzzy with sleep.

"You missed the fresh-kill," Darkcloud called. The warrior was sitting in the morning sunshine with Rainpelt, Stormclaw and Dawnstripe.
Stormclaw was lapping gently at his fur. He paused and glanced up. "The dawn patrol found a gang of starlings and brought some home."
"A thaw's coming," Dawnstripe promised. "The wind smells less of SmokeClan pines and more of DawnClan. It'll bring rain before long."
Darkcloud tucked his tail more lightly under his paws. "Let's hope we don't have ice puddles in camp."

Poolpaw jumped as a bundle of fur tumbled toward her and skidded to a clumsy halt at her paws.
Icepaw.
The white apprentice straightened up, her fur ruffled, as Ravenbird and Amberpaw caught up to her.
Amberpaw's whiskers were twitching. "Nice battle move," she teased.

Poolpaw looked up sharply as she heard paw steps beyond the tunnel. Briarfang and Bluefeather trotted into the clearing, with Blackpaw and Snowheart at their heels. Their heads were high and their eyes bright; each cat held two small but plumb mice in their jaws.
Prey!
Poolpaw's belly growled again.
Blackpaw dropped his catch. "Briarfang uncovered a whole nest!"

The nursery had a scraping noise as Featherpaw slid out. Old pieces of bracken and moss were piled at the entrance and more clung to her fur.

"That's clean enough." Her eyes brightened when she spotted Blackpaw, and then the fresh-kill. "I haven't seen this many mice in a moon!" She raced across the clearing and nuzzled Blackpaw's cheek.
Blackpaw fluffed out his chest. "I caught three of them."

Flowertail wandered from the tunnel, nose twitching. "I smell mice." She picked one from the pile and gobbled it down.

"Hello Poolpaw."
Icefrost's mew made Poolpaw jump.
"Eat something," she meowed. "I'll take you out later for training." She picked up a sparrow from the fresh-kill pile and carried it over to the nettle patch. Huddling in a crouch, she took a bite.

As she sat and waited for the flavors to seep over her tongue, she heard her sister's meow from the other side of the nettles.
"Get off!" Featherpaw was purring with amusement. "It tickles!"
Poolpaw prickled her ears.
A muted reply answered Featherpaw. "What do you expect if you sit on frozen burrs?"
"I didn't sit on any burrs!"
Poolpaw swallowed her mouthful, stood up, and started to creep around the side of the nettles.
"Well, how come your pelt's full of them?"
"It's not!"
"Sit still while I pull this one out." The other mew was hard to recognize, muffled by something.
"Ow!" Featherpaw squeaked.
"Got it!" The muffled mew broke into a purr. "*Now* you look ready to go on patrol."

Poolpaw sprang around the corner, knocking frost from the quivering nettles. Featherpaw spun to face her, her eyes wide.
"Oh...hi!"
Poolpaw was shocked. Blackpaw was sitting close to her sister with a tuft of white fur caught in his whiskers.
"Blackpaw was helping me groom my pelt," Featherpaw explained.

Poolpaw tilted her head left, signaling she wanted to talk to Featherpaw alone.

Featherpaw shifted her paws. "Why don't you check to see if the queens need you to gather some fresh moss?"
They exchanged a knowing look.

The moment Blackpaw had left, Poolpaw stared at her sister in shock. "So.. how long have you..?"
Featherpaw shrugged. "A few weeks."
"What's so special about him?"
"He makes me purr," Featherpaw meowed.
"I can see that!" Poolpaw purred.

Featherpaw's ears flicked. "Why are you so shocked?"
Poolpaw shrugged. "I guess.. I didn't really see you as the type of cat to fall in love."
Featherpaw purred. "He's just so *dreamy*."
Poolpaw did her best not to roll her eyes. *Blackpaw is totally the defintion of dreamy*..
Poolpaw purred. "Well, I'm happy for you, sis!"

On the far side of the clearing, Ashfall was finishing a vole with the elders. Suddenly she sat up. "I know how to keep your nests dry!" she meowed.
"How?" Stormclaw stared at her expectantly.
"There are thick, waxy leaves on a bush near the SmokeClan border," Rainpelt reminded them. "If we gather those and weave them among the old fern stalks, they'll stop the water getting in when the thaw comes."
Stormclaw purred. "It might work!"
Rainpelt was already on her paws. "I'll go collect some right now."

"Can we go, too?" Icepaw glanced at her mentor.
Ravenbird nodded. "The more paws, the better." He looked at Blackpaw. "Do you want to join the leaf-gathering patrol?"
Blackpaw leaped to his paws. "Yes, please!"
Featherpaw plunked at the snow. "Can I come?"

Bluefeather sat up and ran a paw over her whiskers. "A run through the forest will be good for us." She called to the IceClan deputy, who had settled in a cold spot outside of Silverstar's den. "Icefrost?"
"It sounds like a good plan." Icefrost was nodding already. "But make sure you're back for sunhigh."

Poolpaw watched the patrol leave, feeling hollow. No one had invited her. Icefrost had been right. She'd grown so bad-tempered lately, none of her Clanmates wanted to be with her.

She trodded toward the fresh-kill pile, grabbing a sparrow and putting it in front of her black paws. She took a bite of her sparrow, but could hardly swallow.

The apprentices's den shivered as Thornpaw nosed his way out. "Is that prey?" He blinked in the snow as he looked at the fresh-kill pile. His eyes brightened for a moment. Then he glanced around the clearing. "Where is Swiftwing?"
"Too stiff to leave their nest," Stormclaw told him. "This leaf-bare is no good for old bones."
"She must be hungry." Thornpaw scooped up the remaining mice and disappeared into the Elders's den. He emerged a few moments later with snow dusting his pelt.

Poolpaw could hear his belly growling. She nosed the remains of her sparrow forward. "Do you want the rest of mine?"
Thornpaw's eyes glowed. "Yes, please," he mewed. "I'm starving."

Once he'd finished and washed his face, he called to Ashfall. "You promised to teach me some battle moves!"
Ashfall nodded. "I haven't forgotten. We'll go to the frozen place. There'll be more room." She flicked her tail over Amberpaw's flank. "Do you want to come with us?"
"Yes!"

"Can Poolpaw come too?" Thornpaw asked.
Poolpaw blinked. Did he really want her with them?
"She can show us how it's done." Thornpaw looked hopefully at Poolpaw. "Please?"
Poolpaw nodded.

Icefrost got to her paws. "I think I'd better come with you." She stretched and yawned. "Three apprentices may be too many for one mentor."
Ashfall purred. "I'd welcome some help."

Icefrost led the way through the snow-muffled forest to the frozen

place. It was a small clearing and the only spot in IceClan territory that had earth floor.

Poolpaw raced towards and across the clearing.
Battle moves would warm them all up!
She hadn't practiced as hard as she should since Raindapple and Whiteclaw had died, maybe helping to train her denmates would give her a chance to catch up.
"What do you want me to show them?" she asked Ashfall.

The gray-speckled warrior tipped her head to one side. "I think we'll start with Thornpaw."
Thornpaw darted across the clearing.
"He needs to learn to think before he rushes in."
Thornpaw skidded to a halt and turned back to his mentor. "But in battle, there's no time to think!"
"In a battle, planning is the most important weapon you have."

Ashfall looked at Poolpaw. "Can you do a half-turn belly rake?"
Poolpaw nodded. It was one of the first things Icefrost had taught her.
Ashfall padded towards the clearing. "Show Thornpaw."

Pausing to think her move through, Poolpaw squatted down. Focussing on how she would land, she ducked forward, turned like a snake, and twisted, raking her hind claws against the belly of an imaginary warrior before flipping back onto her paws.
"Did you get that?" she asked Thornpaw.
But Thornpaw already darted forward.
He turned, snapping back on himself too quickly so that when he tried to twist, Poolpaw could tell he'd lost his balance. His hind legs flew into the air, flailing like reeds in the wind, and he collapsed onto his flank, "Fox dung!"

Ashfall picked up Thornpaw by his scruff and dropped him onto his paws. "Where do you think you went wrong?"
"I twisted too early?"
"And...?"
"And?" Thornpaw echoed, frowning.
Ashfall switched her gaze to Poolpaw. "What did *you* do before you

tried the move?"
Poolpaw wasn't sure what she meant. "I crouched down."
"What were you doing while you were crouching?" Ashfall pressed.
Poolpaw tried to remember. The move was familiar that she didn't really think about what she was doing.

Then she realized that, in fact, she *did* think about what she was doing. "I imagined my body making the move. Where I would finish, how I would move to get there."
"Precisely," Ashfall purred. "Does that make sense, Thornpaw?"
Thornpaw was already crouching, ready to repeat the move, but this time a look of concentration darkened his gaze. He hesitated just a moment longer, then lunged, turned, twisted, raked, and landed on his paws.
"I did it!" His mew was triumphant.
"Very good."

"Can I try?" Amberpaw was padding toward them.
"Do you want Poolpaw to show you again?"
Amberpaw shook her head. "I think I got it." She crouched. "But I have to imagine the move first, right?"
"Right."

Poolpaw tensed, willing her to get it right the first time. Amberpaw hesitated, then hesitated some more.
"Come on," Ashfall urged.
Amberpaw looked up at her. "But you said *think* before you move."
"Not exactly. Imagine the move, then do it," Ashfall instructed. "But don't waste half the battle planning it in your head."
"Okay." Amberpaw looked straight ahead, then leaped forward.

Her turn and twist were good, but Poolpaw could see that she didn't have the same strength in her hind legs as Thornpaw.
"Not bad," Ashfall commented. "Your timing is great."

Thornpaw pushed in front of his sister. "Can I try it on Poolpaw?"
Ashfall nodded. "Good idea."

Poolpaw took a few paces backward, preparing for Thornpaw's attack. When she faced him, she realized how broad his shoulders had grown. He was going to be a powerful warrior!

She braced herself as he rushed toward her and let him slip around behind her, do the snake-turn, then twist under her belly. He tried to rake her with his hind paws but she leaped up, out of the way, before they could touch her fur.
She was only just in time. He was fast, considering his size and and inexperience, and she landed panting on the ground, relieved she'd dodged his powerful paws.

Icefrost padded to join them. "You learn quickly, Thornpaw." She turned to Amberpaw. "I think you're just too worried about getting it right."
Amberpaw's eyes grew round. "But I want to be the best fighter I can be!"
"Try relying more on your instinct."
Amberpaw frowned. "You mean I shouldn't do the moves I've been taught."
"Not exactly." Icefrost tried to explain. "I think you might be a better fighter if you use what you *feel* alongside what you've learned."

Poolpaw understood what she was trying to tell the apprentice. Rules were sometimes too restrictive. "Why doesn't Amberpaw try attacking me," she suggested, "as though I were an enemy warrior?"
"Good idea," Icefrost meowed approvingly. "You think you could try that?" she asked Amberpaw.
Hesitantly she nodded.

Poolpaw padded a tail-length away and turned, scowling her fiercest scowl. "Imagine I'm a SmokeClan warrior threatening the nursery," she growled.
Amberpaw dropped into a crouch. Her eyes darkened and she drew her lips back in a snarl. Poolpaw was impressed. The young apprentice actually looked dangerous.

Amberpaw rushed at her without hesitation. She was so quick that Poolpaw hardly had time to dart out of the way or plan her defensive moves.
Before she figured out where Amberpaw was going to attack, the apprentice was gripping her back, scrabbling at her spine with vicious hind paws.
Instinctively Poolpaw pressed hard against the ground, then surged up and threw Amberpaw off. She turned and lunged at the dark-

ginger tabby, rolling her onto her flank with a well-aimed paw and raking her claws past her ear.

Amberpaw shrieked in surprise and scrambled away. Poolpaw froze. She smelled blood and saw with horror the nick she had made in Amberpaw's ear.

"I'm so sorry!" She hadn't meant to hurt the young apprentice.
But Amberpaw's eyes were shining. "That was great!" she mewed. "Can we try it again?"

Back in camp, the leaf-gathering patrol had returned with a pile of leaves as big as a hedgehog. Bluefeather was organizing the weaving of the fat waxy leaves into the roof of the elders's den.

"Amberpaw!" Dawnstripe's horrified mew sounded across the clearing. "Your beautiful ear!" She raced to her kit's side and started lapping at Amberpaw's ear. The nick was now caked with dry blood, and Amberpaw ducked away.
"It's okay!" she protested.

"Who did this to you?" Dawnstripe stared accusingly at Ashfall, then at Icefrost.
Poolpaw stared at the ground. "It was me," she mewed quietly.
"How *could* you?" Dawnstripe demanded. "I thought you were training, not fighting."
Icefrost padded to Poolpaw's side. "We were training for battle," she meowed. "Some accidents happen."

"But she'll be scarred for life!" Dawnstripe wailed.
"Good," Amberpaw mewed. "My first battle scar and I haven't even been in a battle yet!"
Dawnstripe closed her eyes and lifted her face to StarClan.

The rattle of stones on the ravine made her jump. Paws hit the ground and pounded toward the clearing.
Something was wrong.

"Invasion!" Briarfang exploded into the camp, his pelt bristling. Braveheart raced in after him. "DawnClan has crossed the ice!" he yowled.

Blackpaw's eyes were sparkling with excitement as he shot into the camp. "They're trying to take Icerocks!"

Silverstar was out of her den in an instant. "Did you see them?" she demanded.
"They're swarming over the rocks!" Briarfang hissed.

"Bluefeather!" Silverstar called to the silver warrior to her. "You head one patrol. Attack from the far side."
"But that will mean going all the way around," Bluefeather argued. "This battle may be lost before we arrive."
"No, it won't." Silverstar curled her lip. "We'll hold them till you reach us. A second wave will finish them."
Bluefeather nodded.

"Take Bladewing, Ravenbird, Icepaw, Snowheart and Rainpelt."
Each cat stepped forward, pelt bristling as Silverstar called out names.
"Go!"
On Silverstar's word, Bluefeather's patrol pelted from the camp with the patrol bounding after her.

"Briarfang, Blackpaw, Featherpaw, Braveheart, Swiftfur, Duskwing, Icefrost and Poolpaw!"
Poolpaw darted forward.
"You come with me." Silverstar's green eyes shone like emeralds. "Ashfall, Crowclaw, Darkcloud, Dawnstripe, and Amberpaw. Wait at the top of the ravine in case DawnClan tries to attack the camp." She gazed around her Clan. "The rest of you, defend the medicine den. This might be a revenge attack."

Panic flashed through Poolpaw. Was DawnClan going to make IceClan suffer as they did? She pushed the thought away. It was too frightening.

Silverstar was already pelting toward the tunnel.
Poolpaw unsheathed her claws to better grip the snow.
Icefrost was a whisker ahead of her, and she followed in her paw steps, running faster than she had ever run before.

She had seen the DawnClan battle, seen how vicious warriors could

be in the heat of the action. Panic threatened to swamp her as she scrabbled up the ravine with her Clanmates pushing behind her, sending stones and snow flying as they raced for the top.

Her lunge ached for air by the time they'd race through the forest and burst from the trees.
The sky was a stormy, dark grey in the sky and she could scent rain and lightning coming.. *very soon.*

Icerocks rose in the dark moonlight. Poolpaw could make out the familiar rocks she would hunt on.
Lined up on its summit was a row of DawnClan cats, silhouetted against the rain that starting falling onto the cats, making their pelts wet. Their heads held high and tails lashing.

Emberstar stepped from the ranks of DawnClan, his pelt drizzling from the rain.
"An ancient wrong has been put right!" he yowled. "These rocks are ours again!"
"Never!" Silverstar hissed. "IceClan, attack!"

Lightning struck as she yowled.

Chapter 14

[image]

~Chapter theme song~
~I'd recommend listening to it before reading this chapter~

IceClan surged forward.

Icefrost hissed to Poolpaw. "Keep close to me! And don't take on any cat bigger than you!"
Poolpaw stared up at the DawnClan cats bristling atop the rock as rain patted the cats below.

Blood pulsed in her ears as Icefrost charged up Icerocks, shrieking like a fox. She hurtled after her, ears flat and eyes round; a screech tore from her throat that was driven by terror than rage. Had DawnClan brought its whole camp?

Let Bluefeather come soon!

Emberstar howled as Silverstar crashed into him, knocking him to the ground.
Icefrost sent a white tom rolling across the slab of stone with a vicious swipe, then leaped on top of him, sending fur flying as she shredded the tom with her flailing forepaws.

A DawnClan she-cat with a mottled pelt raced alongside Poolpaw. Thinking fast, Poolpaw ducked and nipped the she-cat on the hind leg as she flew past.
The DawnClan warrior shrieked and wheeled around. Shock pulsed through Poolpaw as the warrior's eyes fixed on her. They were blazing, lit by fury.
She was going to attack! Poolpaw crouched and braced herself. As the mottled warrior leaped, Poolpaw darted forward, slipping under the warrior's front claws and shouldering her way beneath her belly. The she-cat's claws scraped stone instead of pelt as Poolpaw pushed up with all her might, unbalancing her enemy. She spun to see the she-cat tumble sideways and felt a surge of triumph.

Yowling with rage, the warrior scrambled back to her paws and turned to attack.
Poolpaw prepared to lunge, aiming again for the belly, but the DawnClan cat was ready.

She came in low, knocking Poolpaw's front black paws from under her and sending her spinning and rolling along the rock. Grasping at the stone, Poolpaw's claws frayed without getting a grip, and she found herself tumbling and sliding over the side and plummeting into the snow piled below.

Struggling free from the drift, Poolpaw sneezed the freezing snow from her mouth and nose.
She paused to catch her breath, then began to creep along the base of the rock with her mouth open and her ears prickled, testing the air for any sign of DawnClan warriors.

The frozen river bubbled a tail-length away, swirling into blackness under the cloudy white ice. Steep rocks trapped her on the narrow riverbank. She could recognize the howls and shrieks of her Clanmates battling above.
From the stench coating the snow she guessed DawnClan had swarmed from there up the rock.
She went back into the battlefield.

She was still taken aback by how many cats there were.

She swirled around to see if any cat was coming behind her and as Duskwing passed by, she saw her.
Sunpaw.

Flashes of memories flashed through her...

Wind howling...

The rush of wind against her pelt as she ran to find her parents...

Horror of seeing her friend slaughter her parents..

"Do you feel nothing? You disgusting piece of roadkill?"

And she remembered clearly... her despair.

Anger started rising in her.
Rain swept over the cats, but Poolpaw felt nothing but wanting to hurt her. No... *kill* her.
Her fur started bristling and she unsheathed her sharp claws.

"MURDERER!" She yowled in rage as she flung herself at Sunpaw.

Sunpaw moved away quickly, Poolpaw yowled in triumph as she was able to dig her claws into Sunpaw's ear.
Sunpaw stiffened momentarily before shaking her head, blood droplets flying everywhere.
Poolpaw landed on the ground with a hard thud, and she swung around with pure hatred in her deep blue eyes.

"FIGHT, YOU COWARD!" She snarled as she raised her sharp claws and had aimed for Sunpaw's cheeks, but Sunpaw had ducked in time.
She hissed in fury, "When I am leader of my Clan, I will stop at nothing to take away your *precious* Icerocks!"
Sunpaw's ears flickered. "What are you trying to accomplish, Poolpaw?" They sighed. "I have a high pain tolerance, attacking me like this won't get you anything, in fact I doubt it will even make you feel better."
Hatred pulsed through Poolpaw's veins as she snarled. "You don't know what I want!"

Ha! They don't know what's coming! She then grinned, "And who said anything about me attacking you?"
She then grabbed Sunpaw's scruff and threw it against one of the large rocks and she pinned Sunpaw with her claw onto her throat. "You were always a fool, Sunpaw. Thinking I would merely attack you. No, I'm here to kill you."

"Well that sucks, I was starting to like you."
With a flash of silver claws, Sunpaw hit Poolpaw across the face.
Poolpaw lurched backward with a snarl of defiance and landed onto a sideways boulder.

She twisted around to Sunpaw with a snarl of rage.
Sunpaw sighed lowly, a hiss escaping her teeth. "I don't see why this is necessary, I don't want to hurt you."

A memories flashed from her.

"I just want you to look perfect when you meet the Clan."

"I don't know. But I hope Silverstar chooses well for you."

"Poolkit is safe and sound, and that's all that matters."

"You're going to make an excellent warrior."

Splatters of tears splashed onto the ground from Poolpaw's eyes.

She snarled in rage at Sunpaw even with tears flowing from her eyes, "I DO! YOU KILLED THEM!"

She then lunged with all the strength she had and pinned Sunpaw against her rock, her claws gripping Sunpaw's throat and she grinned wickedly. "Say hello to StarClan for me."
Are you watching, Whiteclaw and Raindapple? I'm about to avenge you!

As she raised her claw, and was about to slash at Sunpaw's throat, she felt a silver white cat knock her off of Sunpaw and sending her flying.
Poolpaw spinned and rolled and landed on her belly with a cough.

She stood up and saw Featherpaw was lifting Sunpaw up with her head. "Go!"
Sunpaw stood up and looked at Featherpaw, her ears lying flat then glancing at Poolpaw. "Poolpaw, I really don't know why you're trying to kill me," She then sprang away.
As Sunpaw fled away to help her Clanmates, Featherpaw gave a glare to Poolpaw that said *we'll talk about this later.*
Poolpaw snorted in annoyance as she glanced sideways as Featherpaw raced away to help their Clanmates with the battle.

As she climbed up a rock boulder, she glanced around the battlefield. How were her Clanmates doing?
"Attack!" Bluefeather's yowl rang over the stone.
The second patrol had come!
Claws scraped rock and frightened yowls rent the air.

DawnClan was streaming from the rock and racing away across the

frozen river. Poolpaw held her breath as the last DawnClan warriors paused on the ice at the edge of the river.

Smashing down with their hind legs, they cracked the ice.
They wanted to stop IceClan from following!
As the ice shattered under them, they leaped light as feathers onto the solid ice beyond and hurtled back to their territory, leaving a channel of black water swirling between themselves and IceClan.

Poolpaw nodded and trodded forward to where her Clanmates were gathering.
"Did you see Emberstar's face when Bluefeather led her patrol up over the edge?" Briarfang crowed.
Rainpelt purred. "I had Sparkshine in a grip so tight she had to beg me to let her go!"
Silverstar padded from warrior to warrior, checking injuries and murmuring praise.

"Where did you get to?" Briarfang looked at Poolpaw. One of his ears was blood and his pelt was ruffled, tufts sticking out where the claws dug in.
"I was fighting," Poolpaw said, she didn't need to explain herself! She was so close to her revenge..

"Let's go home," the IceClan leader said. With a flick of her tail she signaled to her Clan and led the way towards the snowy trees.

Before she could follow her Clan, Featherpaw stopped her in her tracks. "Stop. What happened back there?"
Poolpaw glared at Featherpaw. "I don't need to explain myself. I was going to kill Sunpaw. End of story."
Featherpaw took a step back. "How can you think of killing a cat?!"
Poolpaw growled, "You don't get it! Sunpaw killed mom and dad!"

"So you're gonna be just like them?!" Featherpaw narrowed her eyes.
Poolpaw snarled. "I'm nothing like them! You're weak to even compare me to that traitor!"
Featherpaw's eyes widened. "What happened to you? You're not the Poolpaw I remember."
Poolpaw hissed. "Maybe you don't know me as well as you think

you do!"

Featherpaw looked at her with sudden anger, "Are you trying to join the dark forest?!"
Poolpaw was taken aback and confused, "What's the dark forest?"
Featherpaw rolled her eyes. "Aaaandd of course you weren't listening when we heard the story," she sighed. "The dark forest is a place where cats go where they kill mercilessly, break the warrior code and do great crimes against their Clans."
Then what Featherpaw said next shocked Poolpaw, "The place is disgussting, with sluggish rivers and dark grey trees and the sky has no stars. They even train living cats to become ruthless killers like them."
Poolpaw felt like ice was cracking beneath her, "Can... can the dark forest cats visit cats in their dreams?"
Featherpaw nodded. "Pretty sure."

She needed to see *her*.

She dived into sleep, willing it, wanting it, and woke in the Dark Forest.
Darkfrost stepped out of the shadows with a purr, "Poolpaw, you nearly had them, if it weren't for your annoying sister. Maybe we should plan on how to expose of her."

Poolpaw snarled in rage. "You, ice-breaking, frost-brain!"

Rage scorched through her. With a roar, she leaped at her.
She remembered Darkfrost teaching her the death bite.

Swiping the black she-cat sideways with a hefty blow, Poolpaw lunged for her throat.
She ducked away, growling. Pleasure lit her eyes. "You think you're stronger than me?" she hissed. Darkfrost darted forward and reared at her, slamming her forepaws against her cheek.
Poolpaw staggered, lifted by the force of her blow, and stumbled to the ground.

Poolpaw spun away in time to knock aside another strike.

Claws outstretched, she hooked Darkfrost's pelt and flung her

backward.
Darkfrost scrabbled at the dark earth with her hind legs, recovering her balance in a heartbeat and throwing herself at her, forepaws stretched out, claws glinting like teeth.
Poolpaw ducked and slid underneath her, swiping her hind legs away.

Then Poolpaw turned and leaped, twisting in the air, kicking out her hind legs, swiping with her fore, landing on her back as she struggled to find her paws.

Darkfrost pushed up with a force that shocked her.
Poolpaw lost her grip.
Flying backward, she turned, reaching for the ground.
It hit her before she found it, knocking the breath from her.
She grunted as she felt Darkfrost's weight on her back. Her claws pierced her pelt as she pinned her to the earth.

"Go on then, kill me!" Poolpaw hissed. "I've got nothing left to live for."
"Oh, no," Darkfrost's honeyed mew dripped in her ear. "Letting you live is far better revenge."
"Revenge?" Poolpaw twitched. "What did I ever do to you?"

Darkfrost jerked her backward and stared into her deep blue eyes. Her emerald gaze flamed with hate. "*I* should of been IceClan's leader! But my great, perfect, sister got everything!"
She gave Poolpaw a vicious shake, her claws hooking deeper into her flesh. "She had supported parents, a loving mate, friends with her entire Clan, I should of had all of that!"
Poolpaw tried to wiggle free.
"Oh, no!" Darkfrost yanked her back to face her. "You must listen to the whole story."
Her rank breath breathed her muzzle. "And she was going to be made deputy! Can you imagine what that feels like? To be rejected your entire life? When all you tried to do was love? But don't worry, I made her pay. Let's just say she wasn't able to become deputy if she's a dead corpse!"
Poolpaw tried to backdown a gasp of horror.
"Luckily, I was able to fill her shoes once she was disposed of. But, guess what?! That stupid medicine cat slaughtered me before I

could even get my nine lives and gave me this frost-brain scar." She pointed a sharp claw to the scar that crossed from her eye to her torso.

Her gaze flicked around the clearing. "I *earned* my place in the Dark Forest. But what makes it worse.. I have *other* kin."
Poolpaw didn't like where this was going.

"When my poor sister had died, her *devoted* mate had to move on and took another mate! They had a daughter, and she had a son, and do you know who that son was?"
Poolpaw shook her head, trying to keep up.
"Whiteclaw," Darkfrost snarled. "Your father."

Poolpaw felt like she had fallen beneath cracking ice. *She and Darkfrost were kin?!*

"Do you see now? Do you understand?"
"Understand what?"
"You frost-brain! I could of been leader of IceClan! I've endured so much pain! So many cats have hurt me beyond measure. And then *you* came.. You and I, we both had the same things we want. Betrayed, and hungry for revenge. I always knew when I saw you being born, you were destined to become a merciless killer.. like me."

"You're crazy.." Poolpaw whispered.
Darkfrost thrust her muzzle close. "But I'm also dead."

Her gaze glittered wildly. "Which means you can't hurt me!" She barged past her and Poolpaw woke in her nest with blood welling on her pelt.

Chapter 15

[image]

For the first time in moons, the snowy forest was flourished with prey.

Poolpaw padded beneath the towering snowy trees. She breathed deeply, opening her mouth to taste the faint tang of newleaf.
It wouldn't be long before the snwoy forest was alive with the song of birds and the rustle of prey, and the lean moons would just be a memory.

"What about here?" Icepaw circled a snow-filled tree, looking into the branches. "I think I can see a nest."
Icefrost and Ravenbird followed her gaze.
"Abandoned," Icefrost sighed.

Suddenly a twitch of movement bobbed in the distance.
"Squirrel!" Poolpaw dashed away stealthgngly, joy rising in her belly as she raced between the snowy trees.

The squirrel flashed through the snowy forest with it fluffy tail billowing behind.
Poolpaw ran as lightly as she could, hoping to not make any crunches in the snow.

She swerved past a snow-filled bramble, and found that she was slowly gaining.
She pressed back the urge to run full-pelt in case the thump of her paws gave her away in the snow.

Her mouth watered.
The squirrel would be a delicious treat for her still-hungry Clanmates.

Another few tail-lengths and she would be close enough to pounce.

She controlled her breathing, measuring each breath so that she would be ready. She could already taste the kill.
Now!

She pushed hard against the snow floor, surging forward, sprinkling icicles in her wake. The squirrel ran harder, trailing fear-scent now. Eyes fixed on its gray back, Poolpaw changed her pace, preparing to leap.
Suddenly the squirrel sprang upward. A wooden fence loomed ahead and the squirrel disappeared over the top. Too late, Poolpaw slowed in a halt, her flank slamming into the fence.

Fox dung!
Frustration surged through her.
Where am I?

She sniffed the air. This wasn't IceClan territory.
Warm, strange smells mixed with the sour tang of the Thunderpath. Blinking, she had realized she had crossed the border and was beside Twolegplace. She had been close to this area before while on border patrol, but never stayed near the fence.
She turned, her heart sinking. She wouldn't dare follow the squirrel beyond there. No Clan cat was allowed to hunt outside the territory.

"Hey!"
A voice called down from above her.
Spinning around, Poolpaw saw a fat, golden-brown tabby tom balanced on a branch overhanging the fence.

She tensed, her hackles rising, but the tom just gazed at with round, calm eyes.
"You don't live around here." His voice was as soft as his pelt looked. He tipped his head to one side. "Are you one of those forest cats?"

Poolpaw thought for a moment. Should she leave? What would her Clanmates say if she spoke to a kittypet? She began to back away.
"Don't go!" The tom called. "I want to know what it's like."
"What what's like?" Poolpaw echoed.
"Being a forest cat." The tom crept along the branch but didn't climb down. "Who feeds you?"

"We feed ourselves."

The tom stared blankly.
"We *hunt*," Poolpaw explained. *Doesn't he know anything?*
"Mice?"
"And shrews and squirrels."

"You just missed a squirrel," the tom commented. "It came over the fence."
"I know." Poolpaw flicked her tail crossly. Had this cat just watched it run past without even trying to catch it? *Lazy frost-brain!*

"It sounds like hard work," the tom observed. "What do you do when it's cold? Don't you freeze?"
Us IceClan can't get frozen!
"Our dens are warm," Poolpaw said simply. Poolpaw wondered why she was bothering to answer such stupid questions.
"Your dens?" The tom narrowed his eyes. "Are they like baskets?"
"Baskets?" What was he talking about?

"Poolpaw!"
Silverstar's sharp mew made her jump.
She spun around to see her stalking toward her. "I-I..."

Hot with embarrassment, she tried to think of a good explanation for being there. She decided the truth would be simplest.
"I was chasing a squirrel," she confessed. "I didn't realized I'd crossed the border."
Silverstar glared at her. "So why are you talking to a kittypet?" She flashed a warning glance at the tom. Was Silverstar going to attack?
The tom gazed calmly back.
He's too dumb even to run away!

"Come on!" Silverstar's mew was harsh.
Why was she so angry? She was only there by accident.
"He started talking to me," she defended herself.

Silverstar hissed as claws scrabbled against wood and a second kittypet leaped from the fence to the tree branch and crouched beside the tom. This was a dark-grey she-cat with emerald eyes, and even softer and plumper than the tom.

Silverstar turned and shouldered her way past a snow-filled bramble, beckoning Poolpaw with a sharp flick of her tail. She followed, glancing back at the cats.

"My name's Talon!" the tom called as she padded away. "Next time you can see my nest."
No way! Poolpaw shivered. She would never set paw in a kittypet nest!

She hurried after Silverstar, wondering why she was still bristling.
"Are kittypets dangerous?" she asked.
"Dangerous?" She turned to her. "Don't be a frost-brain! We could have shredded that one!"
"Why didn't we?" she wondered.
"He didn't cross the border." Silverstar padded on, the fur ripping along her spine.

Poolpaw glanced back again, confused. Did kittypets ever cross the border? Why choose to stay in Twolegplace instead of living free in the forest? She wanted to ask Silverstar, but she was staring ahead, her gaze furious.
"Don't go there again," Silverstar growled. "You're a Clan cat, not a kittypet."

As they crossed back into IceClan territory, Poolpaw recognized Icefrost's pelt in the snowy trees.

"There you are!" The deputy hurried to meet them, looking relieved. Ravenbird and Icepaw were following, each carrying a fledgling.
"We'd thought you'd gotten lost in Twolegplace," she meowed.
Poolpaw lashed her tail. "I'd never go there! I just got caught up in chasing that squirrel." Did she think she was a frost-brain like those kittypets?

Poolpaw was acutely aware of the hopeful faces that watched the hunting patrol pad back into camp. Ravenbird and Icepaw had their tiny fledglings and Icefrost had caught a scrawny mouse near the top of the ravine. But she had caught nothing, and her ears twitched with guilt.

"You'll have to go out again at dawn," Icefrost told her.

She looked at her black paws, ashamed. "I nearly caught a squirrel."
"*Nearly* doesn't feed the Clan," Icefrost reminded her.

She had disappointed her. She just hoped Silverstar wouldn't tell her she'd been talking to a kittypet instead of hunting. She glanced at the IceClan leader. She just padded to her den, and now her tail was disappearing through the lichen covering. She'd barely said a word on the trek back.

Dawnstripe stared at the meager pile of prey. "I'm just glad there are no kits to feed."
She glanced anxiously across the clearing to where Thornpaw and Amberpaw were practicing battle moves, their pelts following the the line of every bone. "But our apprentices still need to grow."

"I'll catch something tomorrow," Poolpaw promised. Even though newleaf was tantalizingly near, it would take a moon to fatten the Clan when prey started to run again.

The only fat cat in IceClan now was Duskwing, whose belly seemed to swell while the other cats grew thinner.
Poolpaw watched the tabby warrior, dozing beside the frozen nettle patch in the weak leaf-bare sunshine.
Was she secretly eating prey while she hunted? How come she was so plump when every other cat was hollow with hunger?

There was a scraping noise at the tunnel as Blackpaw padded in with Briarfang. The black apprentice looked smug.
He was holding a shrew in his jaws. He carried it to the fresh-kill pile and dropped it, flicking his tail with a flourish.

Featherpaw nosed her way out of the apprentices's den. "Catch anything?" She said as she trodded towards Poolpaw.
Poolpaw shook her head. "Icefrost says I have to go out again at dawn."
"I'll come with you."
Poolpaw blinked. Featherpaw hadn't hunted with her in a moon.
"You don't have to," she mewed.
"I *want* to," Featherpaw replied. "We haven't been out together in ages."
Poolpaw shrugged. They haven't been out together ever since their

argument at the battle from Icerocks.

The clattering of snowy branches woke Poolpaw.
Cold dawn light filtered into the den, and the snowy ferns rushed in the wind. She fought the urge to tuck her nose under her black paw and go back to sleep. She'd promised Icefrost.

She nosed Featherpaw, curled in the nest beside her. "Do you still want to come hunting?" she whispered.
Thornpaw, Amberpaw, and the others were still fast asleep, their gentle snores filling the den.
Featherpaw raised her head and blinked open her eyes. "Of course."
She yawned and stretched, arching her back till her legs quivered.
Poolpaw gave her chest and black paws a quick wash to wake herself up, then tiptoed out of the den.

The wind outside pricked against her fur and roared in the branches overhead. *Please let us catch something,* she prayed to StarClan.

The clearing was empty. Outside the tunnel, Braveheart huddled against the tunnel as he stood guard, pelt fluffed up and ears flattened against the wind. "You're up early." He meowed.
"Hunting," Poolpaw mewed.
"May StarClan guide your paws!" Braveheart called after them as they headed for the ravine.

As they scrambled up snowy cliff, the wind tugged their fur. At the top it roared like a Thunderpath, shaking the snow-filled trees to their roots.

"Which way?" Poolpaw asked.
"What?" Featherpaw raised her voice against the wind.
"Where shall we hunt?" Poolpaw called louder.
"The forest's thicker near the SmokeClan border," Featherpaw suggested. "Let's try there."
She bounded into the snowy trees, and Poolpaw followed.

As the cold and snow started disappearing in their fur, she could sense the small warmth starting to cling to her fur.
The thick trunks creaked around them as they ran, and the forest

floor felt damp and cold underpaw. They slowed as the forest began to thicken.
Poolpaw gazed into the branches in hopes of a bird they could track, and Featherpaw scanned the drifts of old leaves for signs of scurrying prey.

Suddenly Poolpaw caught a scent.
"Rabbit!" she whispered.
"What?" Featherpaw's eyes opened wide. Rabbits were rare in the forest; they lived on the moorland.

Excitement pulsed through Poolpaw as she tasted the air; it was definitely rabbit. It would feed half the Clan! Then she wouldn't be a complete failure to the Clan! She whipped her head around, searching the scrub.
There!
A white tail bobbed underneath a bramble.

She pressed Featherpaw into a crouch with her tail and began to creep forward over the damp forest floor.
The rabbit bobbed out from under the bush and headed along a small trail between a swath of ferns.
Poolpaw and Featherpaw followed, quickening their pace as the rabbit began to pick up speed.
Had it caught their scent? Something must have spooked it, because it broke into a dash and began racing through the forest.
Poolpaw pelted forward. She wasn't going to lose this one.

It dived under bushes and through patches of bracken. Poolpaw swerved and skidded, keeping up, the white bobtail always in sight.
She was going to catch it. She could almost taste it.
The forest sloped upward as a bank reared ahead of them. She would have it by the time it reached the top!

All of a sudden the rabbit disappeared down a hole.

Poolpaw skidded to a halt. "Fox dung!"
"We have to follow it," she told Featherpaw as her sister caught up.
"Down there?" Panting, Featherpaw stared down the dark opening in the bank.

They had been taught never to follow prey underground. Only StarClan knew what might be waiting in the darkness, and some burrows went on so far it would be easy to get lost and never find a way out.

Poolpaw sniffed at the hole. "The air smells fresh," she announced. "There must be another hole nearby. Maybe it just darted through and popped out somewhere else."
Featherpaw stared, unconvinced.
"We *have* to catch it!" Poolpaw insisted. "It's the best piece of prey the Clan has found in moons."

Without waiting for an answer, she squeezed into the hole.

Chapter 16

As Poolpaw scrambled into the darkness, cold earth pressed against her flank.

She could hear rabbit paws scrabbling ahead.
Blind in blackness, she followed her nose, feeling the sides of the tunnel with her whiskers.
The scent of rabbit was so strong, her mouth watered.
It drew her on, even though the burrow sloped downward into the dark, airless earth.

I have to catch that rabbit. Losing the squirrel still pricked her conscience. She pushed away the fear growing in her belly.

"We should go back," Featherpaw whispered behind her, "before we get lost."
"We can't get lost," Poolpaw hissed. "There's only one tunnel."

She padded onward, relieved when the burrow began to slope upward and the fresh scents of snow-filled forest and the frosty and icy scents. She could also taste stone and lichen. They were near Snakerocks.

Daylight filtered into the tunnel ahead, and she quickened her pace. Once out in the open the rabbit could head anywhere, and its scent would be hard to follow in such windy weather.
Poolpaw burst from the burrow and paused to taste the air as Featherpaw popped out behind her.
Snow crunched softly beneath their paws.

"Can you see it?" Poolpaw whispered, concentrating on the flavors bathing her tongue. Her pelt pricked. She could smell rabbit.
She could also smell blood.
And the stench of fox.

"StarClan help us!" Featherpaw's terrified gasp sounded behind her.

Across the small frosty clearing in front of them Poolpaw saw the fox. It stood with its bony shoulders squared, the rabbit dangling dead in its jaws.
A fierce gust of wind shook the trees and the forest flashed with lightning. It lip up the fox, throwing his shadow against the dark wall of Snakerocks. Thunder cracked. The fox snarled and dropped the rabbit, turning its hungry gaze toward them.

"Run!" Featherpaw's shriek sent Poolpaw pelting up the snowy bank, with Featherpaw's pale white pelt flashing a tail-length behind.
There was no way Poolpaw was letting the fox pursue them underground, in its own territory.
They hurtled through the snowy trees, ducking through snow-filled brambles and swerving around frozen bracken.

"It's following us!" Featherpaw's mew was a terrified whimper.
Poolpaw could hear the fox thundering after them, its paws shaking the ground. She didn't dare look back. She could hear it slither on the snow, only tail-lengths behind, never pausing for a moment.

The snowy forest was lit up again as lightning flashed and thunder exploded overhead. Poolpaw shrieked as she felt hot breath on her heels and pushed on faster. The stench of fox breath bathed her, and she heard it jaws snap a whisker from her tail.

Up ahead, Featherpaw plunged over the ravine.
It would never follow them down there!
Poolpaw hurtled after her, relief flashing as she sent stones rattling down the rocks. A thump sound sounded behind her.
She glanced over her shoulder.
The fox had jumped down after them! It was racing along the trail, a tail-length behind.

"StarClan save us!" Poolpaw wailed, praying her Clanmates would hear and come to their rescue. Slithering down a boulder she crashed after Featherpaw, who ducked out of her way and pelted the last length down the tumble of stones.
"Come on!" She screeched.

But Poolpaw was already half-sliding, half falling down behind her.
Nearly there!
The camp entrance was within sight. They would be safe beyond the tunnel.

Panic shot afresh through Poolpaw.
What if it follows us through?
Thornpaw and Amberpaw would be playing the clearing. They would be easy prey for a fox.
She had led it there. She must stop it.

As Featherpaw pelted through the tunnel, shrieking a warning, Poolpaw skidded to a halt and turned.
The fox leaped at her and she reared on her hind legs, ready to swipe at its snarling jaws. She didn't think about being brave or risking her life. She just knew the fox could *not* reach the camp.

The sky flashed and a great crack sounded tail-lengths above.
Poolpaw looked up.
Lightning!

A splintered snowy branch fell between her and the fox and crashed onto the snowy floor, alive with licking orange flames. The fox yelped in surprise as the branch barely missed it. It whirled around in panic and scrambled back up the ravine.
Her heart pounding, Poolpaw stared at the branch. It cracked in front of her nose, the heat searing her whiskers and scalding her muzzle.

Frozen with shock, she stared until teeth grasped her scruff and tugged her back.
"You'll get yourself killed!" Icefrost's growl brought her to her senses as she spat out her neck fur.

"The tunnel will catch light!" Dawnstripe's panicked mew sounded from behind.
The Clan cats were screaming from the camp, their eyes wide with horror.
The branch was burning so ferociously, Poolpaw felt her pelt tingle. If the tunnel caught fire, the flames would sweep through the camp, engulfing every den.

"StarClan help us!" Ravenbird's desperate cry rose above the crackling flames.
Please! Poolpaw begged silently.

The storm crashed overhead and rain pelted down, driving through the snowy canopy, pounding the snow-filled bushes, thundering on the icy floor. The branch crackled and hissed as the rain doused the flames, until nothing but a charred log fizzled in front of the astonished Clan.

"Wow!" Thornpaw's excited mew broke the silence.
"What are you doing out here?" Dawnstripe shooed him inside.
"I wanna see it burn!" he complained.

"Are you okay? Are you hurt?"
Slowly Poolpaw realized that Icefrost was talking to her. She dragged her gaze from the branch and stared blankly at her mentor. Her heart slowed as she took a huge gulp of air. It stank of smoke and made her cough.

"Come on," Icefrost meowed. "Let's get you to Flowertail."
"I'm here." The medicine cat was standing at the entrance of the tunnel, her eyes round, the fur bristling along her spine. She seemed mesmerized by the smoke rising from the extinguished branch, and her mew sounded far away. "I'll take her to the medicine den."
Wordlessly she escorted her to her medicine den. Poolpaw nodded and went towards a moss bed her size.

Flowertail padded forward, holding an ointment-soaked leaf in her jaws.
"Will it hurt?" Poolpaw asked.
"It will sooth the pain," she promised softly.
Poolpaw held still as she gently smeared the ointment over her muzzle. Her eyes seemed to be searching hers, but she couldn't figure out what she was trying to see.

"Will I be scarred?" she asked nervously.
Flowertail shook her head. "The fur on your nose is just singed," she reassured her. "It'll grow back in a moon."

Then why were her eyes glittering with worry?

Maybe I'm imagining it.

Suddenly Flowertail leaned closer. "Like the bluest flames, you will be blazing through the ice," she hissed.
"What?" Poolpaw flinched away.
"The burning branch was a sign from StarClan." Her eyes glittered. "You are the blue flame, Poolpaw, and you will blaze through the ice. This is your destiny."
Poolpaw was alarmed. What was she talking about?
"But beware!"
She stiffened.
"Even the most powerful blazes can be destroyed by sun and teeth."

"What do you mean?"
"I'm telling you what the burning branch meant," she growled.
Yeah, right! This was coming from the cat who had told her Clan that daylight on a sparrow meant they should attack DawnClan, and look what had happened!

Featherpaw came bounding in. "Are you all right?" She sniffed at Poolpaw's nose, wrinkling her own. "What did she put on it?"
"Comfrey and honey." Flowertail's voice had returned to normal. "It'll sooth the pain and stop the infection."

"You were *so* brave," Featherpaw mewed. Her tail was flicking excitedly as she circled Poolpaw. "I couldn't believe it when I ran into the camp and you weren't with me! I thought the fox had gotten you. But when I came out again there you were *facing* it! And then the branch fell down and you didn't move! You looked like a real warrior!"
"Hush!" Flowertail silenced her. "Stormclaw's in that nest." She tipped her tail towards a moss bed in where Stormclaw, the most grumpiest elder Poolpaw ever knew, was sleeping peacefully. "He's recovering from a bellyache. I don't want him to be disturbed."
Featherpaw dipped her head. "Sorry."

"Out, both of you!" Flowertail ordered briskly.
It was as though she hadn't mentioned a prophecy at all. Poolpaw wondered if she was just playing a joke on her.
She turned and followed Featherpaw from the den. As she padded out, a voice sounded in her ears. "You are the blaze, Poolpaw. Fear

sun and teeth."
She whipped around to see if Flowertail was following, but her golden-furred back was only just visible in the shadows of her den. Spooked, Poolpaw hurried to catch up to Featherpaw.

Darkcloud was waiting for them in the clearing. His eyes gleamed as Poolpaw joined them. "You faced a fox!" He sounded genuinely pleased, but his expression darkened as he went on. "But you're not a warrior yet, so no more fox-fighting on your own."

Before Poolpaw could respond, Thornpaw raced over with Amberpaw on his heels.
"I wish I'd been outside. I would have fought off that fox." He fluffed up his fur and growled.

Featherpaw's whiskers twitched in amusement, but Poolpaw's mind was on Flowertail's bizarre prophecy. Could it really be true?
You are the blue flame? You will blaze through the ice?
Did that mean she is destined one day to lead IceClan?
And how could sun and teeth destroy her? She wasn't a DawnClan cat.

Darkcloud's mew broke into her thoughts. "Hawkflame's leading a patrol to make sure the fox is gone. Stay in camp until they report back."
Poolpaw nodded as Darkcloud turned and padded away.

"Are you okay?" Featherpaw's concerned mew broke into her thoughts. "Did Flowertail give you anything for the shock?"
Poolpaw shook her head.
"Something's bothering you."

Poolpaw scanned the camp, looking for a quiet corner where they could talk. Perhaps Featherpaw could help her make sense of Flowertail's words.
"Come with me," she led Featherpaw to a nearby snow-filled bush in camp.

"What is it?" Featherpaw sat down. "Why are we hiding?"
"I wanted to ask you something." Poolpaw wondered how she could tell Featherpaw about the prophecy when she wasn't even sure of it

herself.
Featherpaw leaned forward, lowering her voice. "What?"

"Do..." Poolpaw searched for the right words. "Do you think..." *This is impossible!* "Do you think I'm...*special?*"
Featherpaw broke into a purr. "Well, of course! You're the best sister in the world!

Poolpaw shook her head, frustrated. "That's not what I meant."
"What else could you mean? Is there something wrong with you? Did Flowertail find something when she checked your burns?"

Poolpaw dug her claws in the ground. She would have to be direct. "Flowertail said the burning branch was a sign."
"A sign?" Featherpaw's eyes grew wide as a snow owl's. "From StarClan?"
"What did it mean? What did she tell you? Does Silverstar know?" Featherpaw blasted her with questions.
"She said I would blaze through the ice like the bluest flames."

"She's as mad as a hare!"
"But what if she's right? Do you think it means I...stand out somehow?"

"I don't even know what that means!" Featherpaw backed away, looking alarmed now. "And you know what her prophecies are like. It was her stupid prophecy that killed Whiteclaw and Raindapple! It's her fault!"
Poolpaw's eyes widened when a memory flashed through her.

There were no stars...

Dark grey trees...

"And she was going to be made deputy! Can you imagine what that feels like? To be rejected your entire life? When all you tried to do was love? But don't worry, I made her pay. Let's just say she wasn't able to become deputy if she's a dead corpse!"

"She had supported parents, a loving mate, friends with her entire Clan, I should of had all of that!"

Surely Featherpaw won't become the treacherous cat she broke ties with...

Featherpaw's mew broke into her thoughts. "You don't actually *believe* her, do you?"

"She also said that sun and teeth would destroy me."
Featherpaw flattened her ears. "She's got no right to scare you like that! How dare she?" The fur rose on her shoulders. "Don't take any notice. Her prophecies are worthless. You won't be destroyed by the sun or any teeth! You're not a DawnClan cat. How could the sun harm you? Don't listen to a word of it!"

Shocked, Poolpaw stared at her sister. Was it really so impossible that she was special? What was wrong with believing she might one day lead the Clan? Featherpaw had seemed eager enough to hear about the prophecy until she found out it involved Poolpaw. "You don't believe it, then?"
Featherpaw tipped her head to one side. "Flowertail's an idiot," she meowed. "Take no notice. Don't let it worry you."

Worry me? Why couldn't she see? *If this prophecy is true, it might be the most important thing that has ever happened to me.*
Featherpaw turned away.

"Featherpaw!" Poolpaw called after her, but Featherpaw didn't seem to hear.
Couldn't Featherpaw at least try to understand how Poolpaw felt about Flowertail's prophecy?

Am I really destined to lead IceClan?

Chapter 17

"I, Silverstar, leader of IceClan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on these apprentices. They have trained hard to understand the ways of your noble code, and I command them to you as warriors in turn."

Silverstar looked down over to Featherpaw. "Featherpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and protect and defend your Clan, even at the cost of your life?"
Featherpaw nodded. "I do."
Silverstar nodded. "Featherpaw, from this moment you will be known as Feathershine. StarClan honors your kindness and cleverness, and we welcome you as a full warrior of IceClan. Serve your Clan well."
Silverstar stepped forward and rested her muzzle on Feathershine's head, and Feathershine licked Silverstar's shoulder gently.

Silverstar then gazed over to Poolpaw. "Poolpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and protect and defend your Clan, even at the cost of your life?"
Poolpaw dipped her head. "I do."
Silverstar purred. "Poolpaw, from this moment you will be known as Poolpelt. StarClan honors your determination and loyalty, and we welcome you as a full warrior of IceClan. Serve your Clan well."
Poolpelt fought to keep her paws still as Silverstar touched her head with her muzzle and Poolpelt gently licked Silverstar's shoulder in turn.

"Poolpelt! Feathershine! Poolpelt! Feathershine!"
Feathershine pressed against her. "We're warriors!" she whispered excitedly.

Happiness flamed like a shooting star inside Poolpelt. She looked around the Clan at the familiar faces, proud to be part of them, warmed by the kindness shining in their eyes.

Icefrost stood up and lifting her chin, she called the new warriors's names loudly to the darkening sky.
She's telling Whiteclaw. The thought stuck Poolpelt's heart like a honeyed thorn, soothing yet painful.
If only Raindapple and Whiteclaw had been among their Clanmates to watch this moment.
But they are among their Clanmates. In StarClan.

The newleaf evening was cold, and the camp was flourished with new snow with birdsong, as though even the birds were thankful for the cold and new life that had sprung in the snowy forest. The fresh scent of prey swirled on the breeze.

"In the tradition of our ancestors, Poolpelt and Feathershine will sit vigil until dawn and guard the camp while we sleep," Silverstar announced.
Poolpelt dipped her head. As the Clan began to melt away into their dens, she noticed with relief that Stormclaw was beginning to fatten up. He and Duskwing were always first at the fresh-kill pile now that it was rich with prey again.

Duskwing had recently moved into the nursery while she waited to have Darkcloud's kits. It turned out that she hadn't been eating extra prey to get fat after all. The whole Clan was pleased that new kits were only a moon away. Even Braveheart was yapping on about getting to become an uncle.
"It just doesn't feel right when you can get all the way to the dirtplace without tripping over a kit or two," Swiftwing had commented earlier.
Even Stormclaw was looking forward to kits. "It's been moons since anyone attacked my tail," he'd rasped wistfully.

As the night seeped in, the clearing emptied out until only Poolpelt and Feathershine were left alone in the dark.
Silently they sat, Feathershine scanning the camp—eyes and body alert, clearly taking her oath to guard her Clanmates very seriously—while Poolpelt gazed up at Silverpelt, wondering which of the countless stars was Raindapple and Whiteclaw.

By the time dawn began to pale the sky, she was struggling to keep her eyes open. Her body was stiff from sitting so long.

The lichen at the entrance to Silverstar's den twitched, and the IceClan leader padded out, with tired eyes. She glanced at the sky, washed pink by pale sunshine.
"Get some sleep," she meowed softly even with the tired eyes as she passed Poolpelt and Feathershine.
Relieved, Poolpelt stretched.

Feathershine yawned. "Where's she off to?" she wondered as Silverstar slipped out the camp tunnel.
"It's newleaf," Poolpelt replied. "I guess even leaders enjoy a little dawn hunting once the prey starts to run."

Out of habit, she turned her black paws toward the apprentices's den. Teeth nipped her tail gently.
"Hey, frost-brain!" Feathershine purred. "We sleep here now." She jerked her head toward the warriors's den.

Of course! Would nests be waiting for them?

Suddenly nervous, Poolpelt followed Feathershine up the slabs at the entrance and padded into the den. She blinked to let her eyes adjust to the den. Nests circled the den and spiraled to the edge. Icefrost, Briarfang, Ashfall, Rainpelt, and Hawkflame were curled in moss lined scoops at the center, while Snowheart and Braveheart slept further out.

Poolpelt guessed that, as the newest warriors, their nests would be near the outer moss beds. But where?
"Can you see any spaces?" she breathed in Feathershine's ear.
"Over here!" Snowheart raised her head and hissed across the den.
Carefully Poolpelt picked her way around the sleeping warriors, her heart in her throat in case she stepped on a tail or a paw or scraped stone and woke someone.

The stone was as flat as a Thunderpath and the moss smelled damp and stale when Poolpelt leaned down to sniff it.
But she didn't care. Right now she was so tired that she'd be happy to sleep anywhere.

"Sleep well, Feather*shine*." She relished using her sister's warrior name.

They could be friends again. They'd hunt together, patrol the borders to check for scent marks and invaders.
Feathershine touched her nose with her muzzle. "You too, Pool*pelt*."
Happily Poolpelt circled down into her new nest, and, purring, drifted into sleep.

The other warriors were gone by the time Poolpelt woke up.
Feathershine was still sleeping.
Poolpelt nudged her with a black paw. "Wake up!"
Feathershine sat up, her eyes blearly. "What?"

Bright sunshine filtered through the den inside.
"It must be nearly sunhigh," Poolpelt observed.
"Are we supposed to be on patrol?" Feathershine wondered.
Poolpelt shrugged. "No one told us."
Feathershine started lapping at her chest. "I'm going to look my best for my first day as a warrior."
"Me too."

Poolpelt's tongue ached by the time she'd finished washing.
She sat up proudly, knowing that her fur was smooth and clean and her tail fluffed up.
A scrap of moss was clinging to Feathershine's shoulder.
"You missed a bit." Poolpelt leaned forward, nipped it out with her teeth, and spat it away. "Perfect."
Feathershine's pelt looked as soft and pale white as a fawn's belly.

Poolpelt led the way out of the den and climbed down off of the warriors's den.
The clearing was bright with sunshine. Blue sky stretched over the camp, and a cold breeze was swishing the frozen leaves in the trees above.

"About time, too!" Icefrost's sharp mew sounded across the clearing.
She was frowning beside a frozen nettle patch.
Dismayed, Poolpelt glanced at Feathershine. "Are you sure no one mentioned a patrol?" she whispered.
Icefrost waited, tail flicking, as they padded toward her. "I don't mind that you missed the dawn patrol," she meowed. "But the hunting patrol had to leave without you, which means they're short

of paws and there'll be less on the fresh-kill pile come sunset."
"But no one told us!" Poolpelt cried. Why was she lecturing her like she was still an apprentice? The fur ruffled on her spine.
"You're warriors now," Icefrost told her. "You shouldn't need to be dug out of your nests to serve your Clan!"
Poolpelt stared at her black paws, too shamed even to glance at Feathershine. "Sorry."

"There's something else you can do."
Poolpelt was relieved to hear Icefrost's voice soften. She looked up. "What?"
"Owlpaw wants to gather catmint from Twolegplace."
Leaf gathering! Poolpelt's heart sank.
"She needs a warrior escort," Icefrost went on.
Poolpelt pricked her ears. This was more like it.

"There's been more kittypet scent than usual around the border," the IceClan deputy explained. "I don't want her to go alone."
So! Kittypets *could* be dangerous. Poolpelt began to understand why Silverstar had been so angry at finding her near the Twoleg fence. Talon didn't look like he could win a fight with a mouse, but it could have been just an act to catch her off guard.

Owlpaw trotted from the tunnel, her eyes bright. "Are these my escorts?" She looked Poolpelt and Feathershine up and down before nodding a greeting to Icefrost.
Feathershine fidgeted in the snow. "Yes," she meowed. "We'll make sure no cat hurts you."
The medicine-cat apprentice's whiskers twitched. "Thank you."

"Are we going now?" Poolpelt joined them.
Owlpaw glanced at the sky. "The dew should be burned off by now."
"Is that good?" Poolpelt wondered.
"It means the sprigs will be dry when we gather them, so they won't rot in the store." Owlpaw was already heading for the camp entrance.

Once in the snowy forest, Poolpaw fell in beside her while Feathershine trotted at her other flank. She scanned the snowy trees, ears pricked for any danger. She was in charge of protecting a Clanmate.

"Is it safe?" Owlpaw asked.
Was that a hint of a purr in her mew?
"No danger here," Feathershine reported.
"What a relief," meowed the medicine-cat apprentice.

The snowy forest was filled with fresh scents as they headed for the border. It was to resist following the prey trails, but they had a duty to perform. Poolpelt wasn't going to let anything distract her.
As they passed the cold hollow, she spotted flashes of fur beyond the snow-filled undergrowth. Icepaw and Amberpaw were practicing their battle moves.
She wondered what Owlpaw had felt when she had been told that she would be spending her time as a apprentice in a medicine den rather than in the cold hollow.

"What a shame you're not a warrior, too," she commented to Owlpaw.
Owlpaw blinked. "But I wouldn't *want* to be."
"Why not?" Feathershine was staring at the apprentice medicine cat as if she had announced she was about to grow wings.
"I prefer to help my Clanmates by healing, not fighting."

"But don't you wish you could hunt sometimes?" Poolpelt wondered.
"Who says I don't?" Owlpaw suddenly darted between the frozen snaking roots of a birch and raked her forepaws through a drift of snow. Plunging in her muzzle, she jerked back with a mouse dangling from her jaws.
Feathershine hurried forward. "That's amazing!"
"How did you learn to hunt?" Poolpelt gasped.
Owlpaw dropped the mouse and started digging, dug until there was earth seen, and dug a shallow hole into the soft earth.
"I don't spend *every* moment gathering herbs!" She dropped the mouse in the hole and scraped the earth over it. "I'll collect it later."
Trotting away, she headed once more for the border.

As they passed through Tallpines, the scent of Twolegplace drifted through the snowy trees, and by the time they reached the line of IceClan scent markers, the smell of kittypet had grown strong.

Icefrost had been right. Poolpelt paused to taste the air, wondering if she could recognize Talon's scent among the jumble of others. She

wrinkled her nose. Kittypets smelled worse than SmokeClan, and there were far too many of them to tell which was which.

Feathershine and Owlpaw had padded along the border without her, and she hurried to catch up to them. "Where's the catmint?" she called.
"Outside an abandoned Twoleg nest." Owlpaw's mew sounded taut.
Poolpelt tensed. "Is it dangerous?"
"Not usually."
"You sound worried."
"I'll be happy when I see if the catmint has survived leaf-bare," Owlpaw explained. "The frosts were usually hard."

"What if it's dead?" Feathershine asked.
"Then I'll have to ask Echofall for supplies," Owlpaw told them. "There's no other cure for greencough."
Poolpelt bristled. Even though greencough could be deadly, asking the DawnClan medicine cat for anything would be humiliating. What if DawnClan used the catmint to bargain for Icerocks?

A blackbird shrilled overhead. Had *they* alarmed it? She let Owlpaw and Feathershine push ahead into a thick frozen swath of ferns and scanned the area.

Poolpelt froze.
A kittypet?

She squinted through the snow-filled undergrowth and stiffened in surprise when she realized it was Silverstar.
What was she doing out here on her own?
She noticed Silverstar still had her tired eyes.
Wow, she must be very sleepy.

Silverstar dropped into a crouch. She raised her belly and lifted her tail a bit and Poolpelt saw she was looking over to a squirrel.
SHE IS HUNTING IN TWOLEGPLACE!

Silverstar then began creeping towards it, and sprang, swatting the squirrel to the snow, pinning it, and sank her teeth into its neck.
Poolpelt took a step back in shock.

She shook her head. Silverstar must have a good reason for hunting in Twolegplace.. she *has* to.
She is supposed to be guarding Owlpaw. Treading lightly so Silverstar wouldn't hear her, she hurried after her Clanmates.

"There you are," Feathershine greeted her. They were crouched beneath a wall. Rocks lay scattered at the bottom, and a break gaped at the top where the stonework had crumbled.

"The catmint's over there," Owlpaw stretched her forepaws up the wall.
Feathershine's eyes opened wide. "What if kittypets come?"
"Scare them off!" Owlpaw leaped up. "It shouldn't be hard," she called from the top. "They think Clan cats eat bones and grow to the size of badgers when we're angry." Scrabbling over the top, she disappeared down the other side.

"Quick!" Feathershine sprang after her. By the time Poolpelt scrambled up, Owlpaw was streaking around the edge of the enclosed clearing on the other side.
"Let's keep watch from up here," Poolpelt suggested.
Feathershine nodded. "I'll stand guard at that corner." She beckoned with her nose to where the wall turned a few tail-lengths away. "And you watch from there. We'll have every view covered."

As Feathershine picked her way along the crumbling stonework, Poolpelt padded to her corner and sat down. Her heart flapped in her chest.
This was her first warrior mission. She was in charge of getting Owlpaw home safely with a supply of catmint that might one day save IceClan a life. They could be attacked by kittypets at any moment. Or a Twoleg might appear from anywhere.

She looked down anxiously. Owlpaw was digging through the thickly weeded undergrowth at one side of the snowy clearing.
"Is the catmint alive?" she called, but the medicine-cat apprentice's muzzle was too deeply buried in weeds to hear.

"Get away!" Feathershine's hiss made Poolpelt jump.
"What's wrong?" She scooted along the wall, hackles raised.

Feathershine was staring down at a tortiseshell kittypet, who was gazing up at her with enormous golden eyes.
Poolpelt arched her back. "We grow big as badgers when we're angry!" she warned.
"*And* we eat bones," Feathershine spat.
Yowling in terror, the kittypet whirled around and sped into the frozen undergrowth.

Poolpelt purred. "That was easy." She bounded down into the snowy clearing and ran to tell Owlpaw. "Don't worry!" she announced. "We're frightened off the kittypet."
Owlpaw plucked her head from the weed tangle. "What kittypet?"
"The one threatening to climb the wall!"
"Threatening, eh?" Owlpaw's eyes glowed.
Poolpelt fidgeted with embarrassment. "Well, it might have jumped up!"

Owlpaw purred. "Thanks," she mewed. "Can you call Feathershine? I need both of you to help me carry this catmint back."
Poolpelt dashed back to the wall. "Owlpaw needs help."
She led Feathershine back to where Owlpaw had piled bundles of catmint on the snow, and scooped up a bundle under her chin just as Icefrost had taught her. The fragrant scent made Poolpelt's claws itch. It smelled delicious. "I can manage more," she offered. Owlpaw dragged another frond from the plant, and Poolpelt grasped it in her jaws.
"I want to try that!" Feathershine sounded impressed. She struggled to grasp two bundles as Poolpelt had, securing them in place at last, and the three cats set off for home with the precious herb.

"You've brought loads!" Flowertail was delighted when they dropped the catmint in the medicine clearing.
Poolpelt felt a surge of pride. Her mouth was still watering from the tantalizing taste. It had been hard not to munch a leaf or two, but she knew it was too precious to waste.
"You must be hungry," Flowertail went on. "Go get something to eat." She glanced at Owlpaw. "You may as well go, too, and while you're at the fresh-kill pile, you can bring me back a morsel to eat."

Icefrost was nosing through the fresh-kill pile when they reached it.

She looked up. "Silverstar's just arrived," she meowed.
Poolpelt glanced at the IceClan leader, who was washing beside the frozen nettle patch.
The image of Silverstar hunting in Twolegplace flashed through her mind. Her pelt prickled.
Should I tell the Clan of her hunting in Twolegplace?

"How did you get on with your first assignment?" Icefrost asked.
"Okay," Poolpelt mewed, hoping Owlpaw agreed.
Owlpaw purred. "They gave me enough time to gather plenty."

Silverstar looked up with her tired eyes. "You were gathering catmint?"
"Enough to see us through till leaf-fall," Owlpaw replied.
Was that alarm flashing in the IceClan leader's eyes?

Icefrost pawed a thrush from the pile. "I'm glad they were useful."
"They scared off a kittypet," Owlpaw told her.
Icefrost dipped her head. "Well done, you two." She sounded generally pleased.
Poolpelt puffed out her chest as Icefrost carried the thrush to Silverstar.
The IceClan leader turned it over with her paw and sniffed it.

Poolpelt's belly was growling like a SmokeClan warrior.
She picked a mouse from the pile and settled beside the cold tree stump. As she began to chew on the mouse, she looked at Silverstar again. She was nibbling delicately on a wing while Icefrost dozed beside her.

Just why in StarClan had the IceClan leader been hunting in Twolegplace?

Chapter 18

[image] [image]

A full moon lit the clearing, dappling the Clans.
For the first time in moons, the great oaks of Fourtrees swished with leaves.

Poolpelt shivered, exhilaration as the fresh night breeze ruffled her fur.

This was her first Gathering as a warrior—and her first where Clan grudges and rivalries seemed to have been forgotten, at least for the truce. EchoClan looked sleek and well fed; DawnClan were talking with other Clan cats; SmokeClan smelled just like the title of their Clan.

Swiftwing was sharing tongues with a orange and white old she-cat, Mallowfoot; a EchoClan elder while the medicine cats huddled together, talking quietly.
Briarfang and Hawkflame sat with Sparrowheart and Coldgaze.

Dawnstripe sat in a circle of apprentices, purring indulgently while they boasted.
"I climbed my first tree yesterday," a tabby EchoClan apprentice meowed, flexing his claws.
Dawnstripe blinked. "Do EchoClan cats have trees? And climb them?"
"I thought you just ran!" Icepaw mewed.
The EchoClan tabby fluffed out his chest. "I can do both."

"Well, I bet you can't catch squirrels," Blackpaw challenged.
"Yuck." The EchoClan apprentice pulled a face. "Who would *want* to?"

DawnClan was acting as though their attack on Icerocks had not happened, and the IceClan warriors weren't crowing about their

victory.

She then spotted Sunpaw.
She sighed. *Better get it over with..*
Even as Poolpelt headed toward her, she felt a prickle of unease and guilt.

"Hey," she mewed.
Sunpaw didn't say anything, just nodded her head in greeting.

Poolpelt lowered her head, guilt roaming through her. "I'm sorry.. of what I did. All those moons ago.. You see.. remember that IceClan attack on DawnClan territory? Those cats you killed.. were my parents."
Sunpaw let out a low hiss. "I know, I found out moons later,"

Sunpaw went quiet again then continued, "Why did your Clan do it." Her anger was clear in that sentence.
Poolpelt sighed. "We had gotten a omen from StarClan.. that DawnClan would destroy us. So.. we panicked."

Sunpaw's gaze was cold as she spoke. "My younger sister was dependent on herbs for the entirety of her life, without them she died two sunrises after you darling saviours saved yourself by causing the deaths of some of the cats I cared dearly for."

Guilt and the pain of agony in her heart nearly made tears fall.
She looked away from the cat who was once, her friend. "Look, I came here to apologize.. I get it if you won't but listen.. I was there.. I saw you kill them with my own eyes.. The words you said.. it made me think you were a monster. I was sad, no one to comfort me.. I was angry, too.. I-I wanted to hurt you.. so bad.. but I realized, sometimes you have to let go of all the anger and hatred or else you'll be caught up in the past," she said, thinking of Darkfrost. She continued, "I understand if you don't forgive me.. I'd understand. I would hate me too if I were you,"
Sunpaw took a deep breath and gazed into her eyes "I don't hate you, that thought is ridiculous. I couldn't hate you and I have always understood your anger. I was angry, in fact I am angry at myself still. I won't lie, I have issues but my actions are my own... and I don't know if I can voice how sorry I am, I'm... I'm glad you

came to speak with me. I've been wanting to talk to you but I was sure you wouldn't want to speak with me.."

Poolpelt looked back at Sunpaw and let out a sigh of relief. "You're my best friend, I couldn't forget the day we met. Can we be friends again?"
Sunpaw's ears pricked up slightly and her whiskers splaying in a small smile, and she opened her mouth to respond.

"Sunpaw." A sharp hiss sounded them and they turned around. In front of them was a brown tabby tom with a white chest and emerald green eyes.

"Brother, how can I help you?" Sunpaw looked uncomfortable.
Poolpelt glared at the other cat. She did not like this cat. AT ALL. He had a dangerous air towards him. *Well, so can I.*

The tom saw her and his ears pricked up with clear interest. "You're from IceClan. My name is Pineclaw, and you are?"
Poolpelt looked at them. She remembered Icefrost teaching her that always at gatherings, you should respectful to other warriors. "I am Poolpelt, and your from DawnClan, I assume?"
"Of course. You seem like a promising warrior, what in StarClan are you doing, speaking with my sister." When Pineclaw's cold gaze landed on Sunpaw, she flinched and looked down at her paws.

Poolpelt stepped in front of Sunpaw, snarling at Pineclaw and her fur bristling. "I speak with who I want." There was a firm low growl in Poolpelt's meow.
"I doubt that speaking with a blatant code breaker will help you as a warrior, especially speaking to a cat who brought several rogues to Dawnclan after running away like a coward for moons as she was too weak to live her life as a Dawnclan cat. Then, after it all, slinks back pitifully begging to be allowed to return and continuing to be a burden." Pineclaw stated coldly, gazing at Sunpaw with contempt.

Poolpelt snarled, her eyes in slits and unsheathed her claws. *If this fox dung thinks he can control me, then he hasn't met me.* She was now very close to his face.
"Well, maybe I don't give a mouse dung of what you think of Sunpaw. And if you have something to say, SAY IT TO MY FACE."

Pineclaw sighed. "I wish I could have gotten through to you but I must leave now." He turned to Sunpaw with a glare. "Make sure to behave tonight, it is beyond me why Emberstar is ever letting you be here tonight." Then he was gone and Sunpaw's fur calmed down.

Silverstar yowled from the great rock. "Let the Gathering begin!"
Silverstar stood at the edge of the stone, moonlight gleaming on her pelt. Silhouetted behind her was Emberstar, Miststar, and Darkstar. Silverstar stepped back as the Clans began to crowd beneath the rock.

Silverstar began, "IceClan's prey is running well. And we have been blessed with two new warriors, Poolpelt and Feathershine!"
Poolpelt felt pride tingle in her pelt as the Clans started chanting her name.

Emberstar nodded. "DawnClan has also be blessed with two new warriors. Pineclaw and Goldenfur!"
Poolpelt then spotted Goldenfur. He was a handsome, golden-tabby tom with eyes the color of the sun. He seemed much friendlier than Pineclaw.

The clan cats started chanting their names. "Pineclaw! Pineclaw! Goldenfur! Goldenfur!"

Darkstar was speaking. His Clanmates watched him, their shoulders stiff.
"It is with sadness that I must announce our deputy, Midnightmist, is moving to the elders's den."
A old, black, she-cat standing at the foot of the rock, nodded solemnly as her Clan called her name.
"Coldgaze will take her place," Darkstar went on.
The cats started chanting. "Coldgaze! Coldgaze!"
Poolpelt chanted in as well. "Coldgaze! Coldgaze!"
A pale mostly white calico tom who gazed down at the clearing with determination, nodding politely to the cats of the Clans.

Poolpelt gave a grin and murmured to Sunpaw, "I feel like he's trying to take my Clan's title."
Sunpaw snorted then used her paw to cover up her laughter.

Darkstar continued, "Newleaf has brought prey and warmth, but also more kittypets," the SmokeClan leader announced. "Only today, a hunting patrol had to a chase out a golden tom from our borders."
Talon? Poolpelt wondered.

Sparrowheart called from DawnClan, "They hide in their cozy nests all leaf-bare and forget that the woods are ours!"
Briarfang curled his lip. "It never takes long to remind them to keep to their own soft lives."
The clans murmured in agreement.

Emberstar looked down at the cats. "DawnClan has increased patrols to remind the barn cats to stay off our land." He looked expectantly at Silverstar.
Poolpelt narrowed her eyes. Would Silverstar tell the Clans about the kittypets intruding on IceClan territory?
Silverstar lifted her chin. "We intend to increase patrols," she paused, suddenly glaring at Emberstar. "To warn off ANY intruders."
Poolpelt shifted her black paws. Why bring up Clan rivalries now? Everyone seemed to agree that it was kittypets causing the trouble. She wasn't the only cat ruffled by Silverstar's challenge. Growls rumbled among the DawnClan cats.

Emberstar's hackles lifted. "Are you accusing DawnClan of crossing your scent line?"
Silverstar shrugged. "I'm not accusing any cat of anything. But IceClan will stepping up patrols from now on." She blinked at DarkStar. "Better safe than sorry."
Poolpelt's belly tightened as anger charged the air.

Gorsefur stood up. "Why accuse the Clans? We were attacking about kittypets!"
Goldenfur growled. "IceClan cats always were a bunch of kittypet friends!"
"Who are you calling kittypet friends?" Briarfang whipped his head around, eyes blazing.
Goldenfur met his gaze steadily. Confidence glowed in the DawnClan warrior's eyes. "You live beside Twolegplace!" he growled. "You're practically denmates."
Arrogant frost-brain! It's his first gathering as a warrior, and he's trying to start fights!?

Dawnstripe bristled. "How dare you, sun-face?"

Miststar called from the Great Rock, "By StarClan, stop!" She looked up at Silverpelt, glittering through the leaves. Wisps of clouds were hiding some of the stars.
Muttering, the Clans fell into a prickly silence.

The EchoClan leader lifted her muzzle. "Kittypets rarely reach our borders."
Echoleap called from below, "They're too slow to chase rabbits anyway,"
"And squirrels," Ravenbird added.
Murmurs of agreement rippled through the Clans, but pelts were still ruffled.

Emberstar purred, "If that is all, this gathering is dismissed!" He jumped off of the great rock, as so did the other leaders.

Poolpelt purred at Sunpaw, "See you at next Gathering. Promise me to TRY not to break the warrior code?"
Poolpelt then noticed Sunpaw's hackles were falling. She must of been angry for some reason, but she couldn't figure why.
Sunpaw's whiskers splayed softly as her hackles fell. "I'm going to miss you, I can't believe I have to wait a moon to see you again and," her whiskers splayed fully now. "I make no such promises."
She darted forward, booping Poolpelt mischievously before winking at her playfully and padding away after her clanmates.
Poolplt rolled her eyes and followed after her Clanmates.

She trodded after Feathershine.

"Why did Silverstar try to upset the other Clans?" Poolpelt whispered.
"She was only warning them off."
"But why accuse *them* instead of the kittypets?"
Feathershine shrugged. "The kittypets aren't here."

That wasn't good enough. There'd been no evidence of other Clans crossing the border. But the kittypets had been crossing and going as they owned the territory.

The morning brought chilliness to the camp. Poolpelt yawned, tired after her last night.
Feathershine had already left on the dawn patrol with Briarfang and Blackpaw.

The newleaf sun shone on the clearing and Poolpelt gathered below Highrock to hear Icefrost name the patrols. She flicked her tail happily when she called her name to hunt with Braveheart, Rainpelt, and Icepaw.

"Poolpelt?" Duskwing was padding from Silverstar's den, the lichen still swishing behind her. "Silverstar wants to speak with you."
"Why?" Had she done something wrong? Perhaps some cat had overheard her ask Feathershine why Silverstar had challenged the Clans and not the kittypets.
Duskwing shrugged and headed for the nursery, her paw steps heavy beneath the weight of her belly. Poolpelt padded reluctantly to Silverstar's den.

She stopped in her tracks in horror as she looked at Silverstar.
Her eyes were not just tired, sleepless eyes..
They were *blood-shot* now.

Something was definitely wrong with Silverstar.

But Silverstar greeted her as if there was *nothing* wrong with her eyes. "Poolpelt," she greeted her solemnly.
Poolpelt stared nervously at her, worried that Silverstar will be offended if she pointed out her eyes.

"I've overlooked part of your training," she meowed.
"What?"
"You haven't seen the Moonstone."

The Moonstone! The sacred stone where leaders received their nine lives and where the medicine cats shared dreams with StarClan! Excitement nearly pushed the fear from Poolpelt's mind.

"All young cats should go there to receive StarClan's blessing," Silverstar went on. "I would have taken you before, but the battle with DawnClan and leaf-bare have made the journey too hard. Now

I want to share dreams with StarClan, and you might as well come with me."
Will StarClan give her better eyes? Poolpelt thought ruefully.

"Will Feathershine come, too?"
"EchoClan may not trust three warriors crossing their land," Silverstar meowed, "I'll take her next time."
Poolpelt knew they had to cross the moorland to reach Mothermouth, the cave that held the Moonstone. Surely EchoClan would know they were just passing through their territory?

The IceClan leader (luckily) closed her eyes. "Go to Flowertail for traveling herbs," she murmured.
Traveling herbs? Poolpelt wondered if they'd taste as bad as the herbs that Flowertail had given to the cats before the attack on DawnClan. "Should I bring you some?"
Silverstar opened her bloodshot eyes again and shook her head. "I must not eat before sharing with StarClan."
Lucky you! She turned and pushed through the lichen.

Flowertail was already waiting outside the tunnel. Poolpelt tensed. She hadn't said anything about her-so-called destiny since the day the fox came, two moons ago. Would she mention it now?
But she just blinked and pushed the herbs toward her. "Silverstar says she's taking you to the Moonstone."
Poolpelt nodded. Was that curiosity flashing in her eyes?
"Eat these." She turned and padded away.

"Hurry up!" Silverstar called across the clearing. "I want to be there by moonhigh."
Poolpelt quickly lapped up the pile of green leaves, gagging against the bitterness, and raced after her leader.
As she followed after her leader, she noticed her Clanmates murmuring to each other.
Guess I'm not the only one who noticed Silverstar's bloodshot eyes.

They followed the route to Fourtrees, retracing their steps to last night's Gathering. Poolpelt could smell lingering Clan scents as they padded past the Great Rock. It looked strange in daylight—dull and lifeless without the moon's glow.

The grass became coarse beneath her paws as they climbed the slope to EchoClan territory.

"Remember," Silverstar warned as the wind began to whip at their fur and the trees gave way to stunted branches, "no hunting here."
Of course not! Besides, Poolpelt wasn't hungry. Flowertail's herbs had squashed her appetite and made her paws itch to run, but she followed Silverstar's steady pace as she led the way through the heather until the ground flattened out into a wide plateau.

Poolpelt scanned the horizon, looking for EchoClan's camp. How could there been a camp when EchoClan territory basically looked like a wasteland?
But only the sound of the wind streaming over the grass seemed familiar.

Suddenly the ground dipped down at their paws and the whole length of EchoClan's territory stretched out on either side.
Silverstar stopped as the world unfurled in front of them.
The moorland rolled down into a wide, deep valley, where Twoleg nests clustered in knots, small as grass seeds, and far in the distance rose a cliff of tall, jagged peaks.

"Are those Highstones?" Poolpelt breathed.
Silverstar nodded.

The acid tang of the Thunderpath drifted from the valley. Poolpelt could see a thin gray strip winding like a river below them. She had seen the Thunderpath that separated IceClan's forest from SmokeClan territory, but had never crossed it. This Thunderpath looked busier. From there it seemed as though the monsters crawled along like insects, but Poolpelt knew how huge they were and had heard of cats killed at them, traveling at such speed that even the fastest warrior could be caught.

"Come on," Silverstar started down the slope.
Poolpelt could smell the scent markers lining the EchoClan border and see the lush grass coating the slopes below. Her paws ached for its softness.

"Halt!"

A EchoClan yowl made them freeze.

Poolpelt stiffened as Silverstar whipped around to greet the EchoClan patrol. Bracing herself, she turned to see Echoleap and Redstripe, the EchoClan deputy, bounding through the heather, their hackles raised and teeth bared, three more warriors at their heels.

"Let your fur lie flat," Silverstar hissed.
Poolpelt tried to calm herself, taking deep breaths. *We're allowed to cross Highstones,* she told herself as the EchoClan warriors pulled up a tail-length away.

Redstripe narrowed his eyes. "Are you going to Highstones?" he challenged.
Silverstar nodded.
The EchoClan deputy circled them, opening his mouth to taste their scent.
"We haven't hunted," Silverstar meowed evenly.
Redstripe snorted. "With IceClan, it's always best to make sure."
Silverstar dug her claws into the peaty soil but said nothing.
"Go on, then!" Redstripe snapped. "And hurry. We don't want you stinking up our land and scaring off prey."

Silverstar turned. Wasn't she going to respond? Poolpelt struggled to keep her fur from bristling with anger, but Silverstar just padded heavily down the slope, head and tail down. There was no fear-scent on her.
But the weariness in her step made Poolpelt wonder what was driving her to share dreams with StarClan. Perhaps she was more worried about the kittypets than she would admit.

Poolpelt could feel the stares of the EchoClan patrol burning her pelt as she headed downhill.
She relaxed only when they crossed the border, her black paws sinking into the soft grass.
From there, Silverstar kept to quiet pathways, winding far from Twoleg nests.

Poolpelt ached with tiredness by the time they neared the Thunderpath, and she was glad of the traveling herbs that kept her

hunger at bay.
The sun was dropping behind Highstones, throwing long shadows across the valley. Overhead the moon hung in a pale sky and stars began to blink.

The roar of the Thunderpath shook Poolpelt's belly.
By the time they reached it, an endless stream of monsters was roaring past, eyes blazing. Dazzled, Poolpelt blinked each time one roared past, and wrinkled her nose at its stinky breath.
Silverstar crouched in the ditch at the edge, steadying her with a touch of her tail.
Poolpelt couldn't stop trembling. The monsters pounded past from both directions, their foul hot wind tugging her whiskers and buffeting her fur. How would they get across?

"Stay behind me," Silverstar ordered.
She gulped her forward till her claws touched the stinking black stone, hardly flinching as another monster roared past less than a tail-length away.

Terrified, Poolpelt leaped backward.
"Get back here," Silverstar growled.
Breathing hard, Poolpelt crept to her side as another monster whizzed past.
"Now!" Silverstar shot forward.

Heart pounding in her throat, Poolpelt raced with her, her paws slipping on the smooth Thunderpath, her mind whirling in panic as she saw light bearing down and heard a yowl of a monster hurtling toward them. Blind with terror, she ran with Silverstar, pressing against her pelt until the ground turned to grass beneath her black paws.

"We're safe now," Silverstar panted.
Poolpelt opened her eyes, relieved to find herself on the far edge of the Thunderpath.

Still trembling, she followed the IceClan leader as she headed to Highstones.
The wind chilly with night air, whipped through her fur. She shivered and glanced up. The sun was no more than a glow over the

jagged peaks, and the sky was black.

Trembling, she searched out the brightest stars. Cloud that be Whiteclaw and Raindapple watching her first journey to the Moonstone?

The land sloped and steepened, and the grass turned to stone beneath their paws.

Silverstar was breathing heavily. And Poolpelt's belly was beginning to growl. There would be little to hunt on this bare, rocky solid dotted only with heather made ragged by the wind.

She was relieved when Silverstar paused. She lifted her silver muzzle and stared up the slope. "Mothermouth."

Holding her breath, Poolpelt followed her gaze. Above them, as the slope grew steeper and rockier, a hole gaped in the hillside. Square and black, it yawned beneath a stone archway.

Silverstar glanced at the moon glowing high overhead. "It's time."

Chapter 19

"Welcome to Mothermouth." Silverstar brushed her tail lightly over Poolpelt's shoulder before entering the tunnel. Almost at once, her light-grey tabby coat vanished in the shadows.
With one last glance at the star-filled sky, Poolpelt followed.

Darkness swallowed her, pressing so thick that she held her breath and waited for the blackness to swamp her like water.

Silverstar's paw steps brushed the floor as it began to slope down into the earth, and she padded after her with the blood roaring in her ears.

"Silverstar?" she gasped. Freezing air rushed into her lungs. The taste of water and stone and earth bathed her tongue. Where was she? Her scent was lost in the jumble of strange odors. Crushed by the darkness, panic surged through her pelt. She darted forward, squawking as she crashed into her and bowled her over.
"What in the name of StarClan are you doing?" Silverstar scrambled to her paws, untangling herself from Poolpelt.
Hot with embarrassment, she jumped up, wishing she could see...*something.* "I got scared." She felt her pelt press against hers.
"We're nearly there," she promised. "I'll walk beside you till it gets lighter."
"Gets lighter?" Poolpelt peered ahead in disbelief. How could it be light down there?
And yet, after a few more paw steps, her eyes detected a glow in the tunnel ahead.

As Silverstar pulled away, Poolpelt began to make out the tall, smooth sides of the tunnel, glistening with moisture. And then the tunnel opened into a cavern arching high above Silverstar, making the IceClan leader look very small.

Vast curved walls reached to a ceiling and there, at the top, a hole

was open to the sky. The scents of heather and wind washed down, and moonlight flooded in and bathed the great stone standing in the center of the cave. The stone reached several tail-lengths high, sparkling like countless dewdrops and illuminating the cave like a captured star.

Poolpelt's black paws would not move. She stood and stared, horribly aware of the choking blackness that stood between her and freedom, longing to feel the wind in her fur and frightened by the thought that StarClan shared dreams in this place. Were her ancestors with them now, weaving invisibly around her? She pressed herself against a wall, instinctively backing away from the Moonstone.

"Make yourself comfortable," Silverstar told her with her *freaky* blood-shot eyes. "I must share dreams with StarClan now."
Poolpelt crouched down, fluffing out her fur to protect her belly from the stone floor. She wondered if snow ever filled this cavern, and she yearned for coldness and brightness to sweep away the eerie glow.

Silverstar approached the Moonstone with her tired, blood-shot eyes, and, crouching beside it, touched the sparkling crystal with her nose. Instantly her eyes closed and her body stiffened. Poolpelt tensed, waiting for sparks or flashes. But nothing moved or changed; the cave was silent but for the wind sighing down around the Moonstone. The journey had been long and she felt tiredness creep through her. Her eyes glazed and grew heavy, and she let them close so that darkness engulfed her.

Dreaming now, she gulped as a creature of nightmares snarled menacingly. Terror and panic surged beneath her pelt as a fierce slashed over her dappled back, blood splattering out.
Struggling against the torment, she yowled and charged forward and went over to bite their shoulder, but the creature simply slashed through her face, flinging her aside.
Poolpelt panted as blood started dripping down her eye.
As she opened her remaining eye, she could see the sun flashing so fast over the creature, and it was like the creature disappeared like smoke.
She woke gasping, her pelt bristling with fear.

Silverstar stood outlined against the shimmering crystal. She stared at her with her narrowed blood-shot eyes. "Nightmare?"
Panting, she nodded and got clumsily to her black paws, still drowsy with sleep and swamped by terror.
"Fresh air will clear your head." Silverstar led the way from the cavern.

Poolpelt followed, too shocked by her dream to speak, the memory of being slaughtered seared in her thoughts. She let her whiskers touch Silverstar's tail and followed her paw steps up the black, ice-smooth tunnel, until at last moonlight washed her black paws and she felt the wind brush her fur.

"We'll rest here till dawn." Silverstar was already curling into the smooth shelter of a boulder just beyond the mouth of the tunnel. It was chilly underpaw, but Poolpelt was glad to be out in the open. Silverpelt sparkled above them.

Whiteclaw and Raindapple.
The warm scents of her parents seemed to enfold her, comforting her.
She stopped shivering, but her mind still swirled.

Was she really going to get slaughtered, to be destroyed by teeth as Flowertail had told her?

The rising sun woke her. It felt as if she had hardly slept at all, but her dream had faded and she could no longer taste blood in her mouth. Poolpelt blinked open her eyes and gazed at the milky horizon, watching the pink sun lap the distant moorland.

Poolpelt couldn't wait to be home, back in the ravine among her Clanmates. She paced the rock, sniffing hopefully for prey, while Silverstar stretched and washed and finally set off down the slope. They skirted the Twoleg nests, and when they reached EchoClan territory they skirted the edge of that, too. Poolpelt felt like a thief, skulking in the shadows beyond the scent markers.
Silverstar hardly spoke.

Poolpelt decided that if she were leader she would not be bullied by EchoClan patrols. The warrior code gave them permission to pass

over the moors. No cat had the right to stop a leader from sharing with StarClan.
Then she remembered the hostility in Redstripe's eyes. Did she really want to face that after such a long journey? Her paws felt too heavy to fight and her mind was too sleepy to argue.
She wondered if DawnClan will do the same too.

"Will they hate us forever?" she wondered out loud.
Silverstar glanced at her with her blood-shot eyes and seemed to understood what she meant. "DawnClan?" She sighed, her breath whipped away by the breeze.
"They'll forgive us for the attack, then hate us for some other reason. Just as the other Clans will. The four Clans will be enemies until the end." She trudged forward, tail down.
Though she spoke, she hardly seemed to be talking to Poolpelt at all. "And yet we all want the same things: prey to hunt, a safe territory to raise our kits in, and peace to share dreams with our ancestors. Why must we hate one another over such simple desires?"

Poolpelt stared at the silver haunches of her Clan leader.
Was this really how she saw Clan life? There was more to it than hatred and rivalry! The warrior code told them to protect their Clanmates and fight for what was theirs. Did that mean nothing more than hating every cat beyond their borders?

She remembered the DawnClan battle and the battles over Icerocks. Maybe that *was* all it meant. She would hate DawnClan forever. She would hate any Clan that harmed those she loved, and from what she had seen, the other Clans meant nothing but harm.

They reached the ravine at last and stumbled down on tired paws. Afternoon sun spilled into the snowy camp, lighting the clearing so that Poolpelt could see it flashing through the icy treetops. The familiar scent of home warmed her paws.

"Go rest in your den," Silverstar ordered as they padded through the tunnel. Her tone was brisk; she sounded once more like a IceClan's leader, and the weariness she had heard on the moors seemed to have lifted.

Relieved to be back where things felt normal, Poolpelt felt her belly rumble.
They hadn't stopped to hunt, and she was starving. But exhaustion reached down into her bones. Sleep first, then food.

She scuffed the ground as she stumbled towards the warriors's den and pushed her way in. Someone had added extra-moss to her nest. Gratefully, she sank down into it and closed her eyes.

"You're back!"
A mouse thudded in front of her nose.
Feathershine was circling her nest. "What was it like? Was it big? Did Silverstar dream? Did you dream? What happened?"

Poolpelt lifted her head and blinked at her sister. "It was big and shiny, and Silverstar dreamed."
"What about?"
"She didn't say."

"Is it really far? Did you see any Twolegs? How big are Highstones? Bluefeather says they're the biggest things in the world."
"They're higher than the moorland. And we avoided the Twolegs. And we walked all day."

Poolpelt sniffed the mouse. Her mouth watered at the smell, but she was too tired to chew. "Thanks for cleaning my nest," she murmured, eyes half closed.
"That wasn't me." Feathershine sounded surprised. "That was Braveheart. He'd said you'd be tired when you got back."

Poolpelt closed her eyes, too tired to comment, and felt Feathershine's warm muzzle press her head.
"Sleep well, sister."

Poolpelt heard stone crape as Feathershine left her to sleep and drifted away into a swirl of stars and voices that whispered just beyond her hearing.

And all around her, agony of blood tugged at her pelt and chilled her to the bone.

Chapter 20

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Poolpelt followed Briarfang, Blackpaw, and Braveheart through the snowy trees as they headed back to camp after an early border patrol.

Soft greenleaf sunshine dappled her pelt, and a bee buzzed closer to her ear as it looped its way through a clump of frozen ferns. Greenleaf was the time for where more herbs grew, and more prey flourished.

"It would be a perfect day to be lying on Icerocks," Blackpaw mewed wistfully.
Briarfang snorted. "I can't believe Silverstar hasn't done anything to take them back from those DawnClan sun-faces."
"She should have launched an attack the moment they moved the border markers." Blackpaw batted the air in a mock lunge. "Instead we have to watch those sun-faces loll about on *our* territory."

"We don't need the prey from Icerocks," Braveheart pointed out. "There's enough in the rest of the forest."

"That's not the point!" Briarfang snapped. "She's made us look weak. SmokeClan will be helping itself to Snakerocks next."
Poolpelt flicked her tail. "SmokeClan can *have* Snakerocks. It attracts more adders and foxes than it does prey."
A low growl rumbled in Briarfang's throat.

"Shedding blood over Icerocks is pointless," Braveheart argued. "From what the elders say, it's happened enough times in the Clan's history already. It's easier just to let them have it. We have enough prey."
"In *greenleaf!*" Blackpaw snapped. "But what about during leaf-bare, when we need every whisker of territory?"

Poolpelt narrowed her eyes. "If it becomes worth fighting over, then I'm sure Silverstar will fight." She wished she could shake away the doubt, from where Silverstar has looked more tireder and tireder and not to mentioned her blood-shot eyes, but she wouldn't stand for her Clanmates insulting the IceClan's leader.
Blackpaw curled his lip. "Has our leader been confiding in *you?*"
Poolpelt shrugged, as they reached the top of the ravine. She didn't want to start a fight with this apprentice, *especially* Feathershine's lover. Also, she actually admired Blackpaw's courage. "She doesn't need to, it just makes sense."
She shouldered past Blackpaw and bounded down the rocks.

Duskwing was basking outside the nursery. Her belly was so swollen with kits, she looked as round as a badger.
"Warm enough?" Poolpelt asked as she passed.
Duskwing lifted her head. "It can't be too warm for me," she purred.

Poolpelt headed for the fresh-kill pile.
"There's plenty of prey to choose from." Thornpaw was lying beside the tree stump with Amberpaw. "I caught a thrush and a vole myself."
Amberpaw flicked her tail across his ears. "Stop showing off!"
Thornwing lapped his paw. "I was just being honest."
Poolpelt's whiskers twitched. "Following the warrior code, I suppose," she teased.

She stepped out of the way as Icefrost came hurrying towards the apprentices's den.
"Hey, Thornpaw! Have you seen Silverstar?"
Thornpaw looked up. "I thought she went out with a hunting patrol."
Icefrost narrowed her eyes. "I thought so, too, but the hunting patrol's just came back and Silverstar's not with them."

Poolpelt tipped her head to one side. Had the rest of the border patrol noticed her sniffing for Silverstar's scent as they passed the Twolegplace border?
She couldn't forget seeing her hunting in Twolegplace, and since their trip to the Moonstone a moon ago, and her blood-shot eyes, the feeling that something was wrong with the IceClan leader had never entirely gone away.

Was she in Twolegplace right now, hunting mice?

Thornpaw gave up on his paw and padded over to the icy-colored tabby warrior. "Would you like me to look for her?" she offered.
Icefrost shook her head. "I want you to come with me on a patrol to check the border along the river," she explained. "DawnClan may have taken Sunningrocks from us, but they're not allowed to set one paw on this side of them. The dawn patrol picked up some scents as far as in the trees, so I think we should patrol there more often in case those sun-faces have any ideas about invading us. Poolpelt, you can come, too."

Poolpelt glanced at the tetering pile of prey. "Have I got time for a mouse?"
"Make it quick." Icefrost turned. "I'll round up Bluefeather and Snowheart."
Poolpelt gulped down a mouse as Thornpaw jumped to his paws.

"Are you coming?" She asked Amberpaw.
Amberpaw shook her head. "Rainpelt's teaching me some battle moves for my next assessment."

Thornpaw glanced at Poolpelt. "I guess it's up to us to scare off those mangy DawnClan cats." His fur bristled along his back. "Why can't they stick to their own territory? They don't even *like* voles."

Poolpelt flattened her ears, surprised by his fierceness. He'd been a little more than a kit last time they fought'd DawnClan; now he was ready to claw their ears off. She suspected he was secretly hoping they *had* crossed the border, which would give IceClan a reason to attack.
Blackpaw wasn't the only cat in IceClan who felt uncomfortable losing Sunningrocks without a fight. But still, she believed Silverstar had been right.

"A battle's no fun," she warned Thornpaw.
"At least you've had the chance to find out!" he complained. "I only ever get to meet the other Clans at Gatherings!"
Did he really prefer fighting to talking?
Poolpelt narrowed her eyes, then remembered Sunpaw. At least in battle you knew where you stood and whom you could trust.

She cuffed Thornpaw softly over the ear. "Come on."

He stopped arching his back and bristling as though he were already fighting, and followed Poolpelt as she joined Icefrost, Snowheart and Bluefeather.

As soon as they reached the new DawnClan border, Poolpelt guessed the dawn patrol had been mistaken. Though thr markers were fresh, the only DawnClan scents on the far side were so weak they could have drifted across on the breeze.
And yet at the sight of DawnClan warriors lounging on the cold rocks beyond made Poolpelt bristle.
She may have defended Silverstar's decision to let them take the rocks, but to see them using what had been IceClan territory made her claws itch.

Icefrost growled beside her, and Bluefeather plucked at the ground. "Silverstar's going to have to take them back eventually," she spat. "They insult us every time they set paws on those rocks."

"Cowards!" Thornpaw yowled across the boulder.
Bluefeather quickly tugged him back by his tail. "A smart warrior only starts battles he might win!" she hissed.
Poolpelt flicked her tail. "I'll be right back," she murmured. She needed to see which sun-faces smudged their rotten scent on her icerocks!

She jumped down the snowy ledge and hid into the frozen bushes nearby.

The DawnClan cats were basically grooming themselves.
Poolpelt recognized Sunpaw. Was she a friend or a an enemy now? Was she supposed to think of her as she does at Gatherings or in battle?

She growled under her breath. She couldn't see much in the bushes, she crawled out of them and leaped towards flat boulders where the group of DawnClan cats wouldn't see her.

A golden tabby pelt slid off the rocks and onto the soft snow and padded towards Poolpelt.

Goldenfur.
Trust the arrogant DawnClan warrior to push his luck.

"Well, hello Poolpelt!" He smiled at her.
Poolpelt hissed, flattening her ears. Even though a DawnClan cat, Goldenfur's eyes gleamed brighter when he saw her, and she found herself drawn into his gaze. "What do you want? I'm busy!"
Goldenfur purred and rolled onto his back as if he wasn't face-to-face with an enemy warrior. "Of course, of course! I actually admire you, Poolpelt."
Poolpelt raised an eyebrow. "Admire me? Why?"
Goldenfur gave a cheeky grin and sat up. "You're fierce, you're not afraid to speak your mind, you're talented, independent... *beautiful*."
Poolpelt was taken aback by the last one. *Does.. does he really think I'm beautiful...? GAH! Why do I care!? And why is my heart beating so fast?*

"Poolpelt!" Icefrost's sharp mew sounded behind her, but she couldn't break his gaze from his gaze.
She hissed once more, "DawnClan furball!" she spat.
Goldenfur's whiskers twitched amusingly and then turned and slowly padded away up the rocks.
Poolpelt shivered and jerked away.

"Don't let them get to you," Bluefeather advised.
Poolpelt nodded, wondering why secretly in her heart she wanted to see Goldenfur again.
She snorted frustratingly as she followed her Clanmates away through the snowy trees.

Silverstar was back when they reached the camp, sitting back in the frozen nettle patch with Bladewing. "Icefrost." She nodded in greeting to her deputy as they reached the clearing. "Is all quiet on the borders?"
"Yes," Icefrost replied. "Did prey run well for you?"
Silverstar nodded. "StarClan was good to me."
Nervousness swept through Poolpelt as she gazed past the IceClan leader and saw a plump starling lying in the fresh-kill pile.
Even though Silverstar had made a good catch, how could Poolpelt know for sure it wasn't caught in Twolegplace?

The nursery had stone scraping. Flowertail slid out, her eyes bright with worry.
"Duskwing's kits are coming!"

"So early?" Swiftfur whipped her head around. "They're not due for half a moon." Her eyes shimmered with worry for her daughter.
Bladewing got to his paws and hurried from the frozen nettle patch. "Is she okay?"

Flowertail didn't answer. Instead she called to the kits's father. "Darkcloud! Will you stay with her while I get supplies?"
Darkcloud backed away, looking startled.
Has he forgotten Duskwing is having his kits? Poolpelt thought with anger.
"I think it's best if I leave it to you and Owlpaw." Darkcloud sounded awkward. Was he just being squeamish?
Swiftfur snorted and squeezed into the nursery. "*I'll* watch her!"

Swiftwing padded out of the Elders's den with Stormclaw beside her. "New kits!" she rasped, eyes shining.

Flowertail hurried toward the medicine den and nearly ran into Owlpaw, who was wandering out of the tunnel. "Watch where you're going!" Owlpaw snapped. Then she froze. "Sorry!"
"Duskwing's kitting!" Flowertail yowled as she dove inside the medicine cat den

Feathershine slid out of the warriors's den and climbed down. "Did I hear that Duskwing's kits are coming?"

Owlpaw's face went pale. "What do I do?"
Flowertail yowled as she came racing back from the medicine den with a leaf wrap tight in her jaws. "Get medicine supplies!" She scrambled back into the nursery.
Owlpaw did as told, went inside the medicine den, came out with herbs and went inside with Flowertail.

"It's been so long since there've been kits," Swiftwing sighed.
Springleaf picked up a squirrel and carried it to the shade below Highrock. "We might as well eat," she told Swiftwing. "These things take time."

Poolpelt began to pace until her black paws ached. As the Clan cats began to return from patrols and hunting parties; they gathered in the clearing, eyes flicking more anxiously toward the nursery as time passed with no word from Flowertail.

"Shouldn't you be with her?" Springleaf called pointedly to Darkcloud, who was crouched by the frozen nettle patch.
"What could I do?" Darkcloud answered. "I'm no medicine cat."
Springleaf began to mutter something in Bladewing's ear and turned her gaze back to the nursery.

Ravenbird and Snowheart sat at the edge of the clearing.
"There'll be more warriors for IceClan by nightfall," Ravenbird meowed.
Snowheart flinched as a agonized wail sounded from the nursery.
"May StarClan light their path," she murmured.

The sun began to sink low over the snow-filled trees when Rainpelt and Amberpaw padded into the snowy camp.
"How was training?" Poolpelt called to her old denmate.
"Rainpelt says I should be fine for my assessment." Amberpaw trotted over and nodded toward the nursery. "What's going on?"

"Duskwing's kitting," Poolpelt told her.
Rainpelt's tail flicked. "Already?" Her eyes clouded with worry.
"How long has she been at it?"
"Most of the afternoon."

The nursery stone scraped as Owlpaw squeezed out. Her eyes were glittered with tension, and her pelt was sticking up along her flanks.
Poolpelt hurried to meet her. "Is she okay?"
Owlpaw ignored her. She trotted towards the medicine cat den and went inside. She came back out with prickled leaves and went back inside the nursery.

Pelts were bristling around the clearing as the Clan realized that all was not going well.
The entire Clan was uneasy.

Bladewing, Icefrost, Briarfang, Hawkflame, and Rainpelt paced the clearing, their pelts pricking as though frustrated that they could

not fight this battle with Duskwing.
Snowheart pressed against Bluefeather while Swiftufr and Braveheart circled them, glancing every now and then at the darkening sky.

Darkcloud gotten to his paws and was padding along his Clanmates. "We must eat," he meowed. "Starving ourselves won't make these kits come any quicker."
Poolpelt scowled at him. These kits?! They were his kits! Didn't he care?!

Icefrost nodded and took a frozen pigeon from the fresh-kill pile. Thornpaw picked up a squirrel and carried it awkwardly to the tree stump.
Blackpaw was already eating with Feathershine beside the frozen nettle patch.

Icepaw looked up and caught Poolpelt's eye. "Join us," she called. She was sharing a mouse with Amberpaw.
Poolpelt padded gratefully toward the two apprentices. She wasn't hungry but needed the comfort of sharing food with Clanmates. Her thoughts wandered towards to Goldenfur earlier the day...

Why did his sun-like eyes make my heart skip a beat?

Why did his golden, handsome fur make me want to keep smiling at him?

Why do I want to seem him again?

As she took a bite of the mouse, she glanced to the nursery.

While the Clan shared tongues after the meal, Silverpelt began to glitter overhead.
Icefrost yawned and got to her paws. "There will be duties tomorrow...whatever happens tonight." She glanced at the nursery and padded away to her den. Nodding and sighing, the rest of the Clan cats began to melt away to their nests.

Braveheart padded past Poolpelt. "You have to sleep, too," he meowed.

"I will...soon," Poolpelt promised, knowing it would be impossible. How could she sleep, knowing Duskwing was suffering?

As Braveheart padded away, a tiny wail sounded from the nursery. Poolpelt jumped to her black paws. *A kit?*
Flowertail stepped out of the nursery. "The first kit has been born!" she called. "A she-cat!"

Heads poked from the dens, and murmurs of joy and relief rippled around the snowy camp.
Poolpelt rushed past Flowertail and pushed her way into the nursery. "Is Duskwing okay?" she demanded.
Swiftfur was lapping Duskwing's ears; she looked up, her eyes glowing with hope.

Poolpelt looked down and saw a small, gray she-cat with dark grey paws and pale blue eyes.

Owlpaw was busy crouched over the young queen, and Poolpelt held her breath as another kit plopped onto the cold moss. Flowertail came in and lapped it and, grasping it by its scruff, dropped it beside its littermate at Duskwing's belly.

"One more to go," she mewed.
Duskwing shuddered as the last kit fell into the nest.
"A tom!" Flowertail mewed happily. She lapped it and placed it beside the other two.

Swiftfur purred as Duskwing strained to lap at her three kits. Relief and joy flooded Poolpelt, and she backed out of the nursery.

The Clan had gathered around Darkcloud in the clearing.
"Congratulations!" Briarfang meowed.
"Another battle fought and won," Icefrost purred.

Ravenbird raced up to Poolpelt. "Have you seen them?"
She nodded. "Two she-cats and a tom."
"Did you hear that?" Ravenbird turned over to Snowheart. "Two she-cats and a tom."
The news whispered like wind through the Clan, and purrs rose

from the clearing.

Flowertail stepped away from the nursery and padded across the clearing. "Don't celebrate too soon. Those kits may not survive." Shoulders hunched, she disappeared into the shadows of the stone tunnel.

Her words echoed behind her, sending shivers through the Clan.

Chapter 21

It was still dark when stabbing pains woke Poolpelt, clutching her stomach like talons.

She staggered to the dirtplace, almost too wrapped in pain to notice the tiny mewling coming from within the nursery.
But when she returned and padded across the snow, she heard soft voices murmuring and soothing the cries.
By the sound of it, Flowertail and Swiftfur were still with Duskwing.

A shadow moved at the edge of the clearing. Amberpaw was creeping out of the apprentices's den.
"Hey!" Poolpelt hissed.
Amberpaw stopped and turned, her eyes flashing in the darkness. Her fur was ruffled, and she looked as wretched as Poolpelt felt.
"Go to get to the dirtplace," she mewed.

"Bad belly?" Poolpelt asked.
Amberpaw nodded. "Icepaw, too."

It must have been the mouse they'd share.
Poolpelt climbed and crept back up to her nest and settled down. Sleep came, but fitfully. Pain haunted her dreams.

"Get off!" Feathershine pushed her away. "You've been kicking me all night!"
"Sorry," Poolpelt groaned. "Bellyache."
Feathershine sat up and blinked sleepily. "Should I get Flowertail?"
Poolpelt shook her head. Her belly was so cramped and sore, she found herself panting between words. "She'll be too busy with the kits,"
Feathershine yawned and curled back down in her nest. "Tell me if you change your mind."

Poolpelt lay blinking in the darkness awhile longer, trying not to

fidget. Eventually the urge to use the dirtplace again was too much for her.
She crawled out of the den and climbed down and padded onto the snowy, icy clearing.
Dawn drew a milky haze over the horizon as it began to push back the night sky.
The air was clear and cold, refreshing through Poolpelt.

She paused by the nursery, her ears pricked up. A tiny mew shrilled, then another.
Thank StarClan!
At least two of her kits had survived the night.

Feeling weak, Poolpelt returned from the dirtplace, breathing hard as she padded from the tunnel.
Was that Thornpaw creeping out of the camp through the tunnel? It was early for an apprentice to be heading into the snowy forest alone.
She padded after him, stopping when she reached the entrance to camp.
Silverstar's scent was fresh on the snow-filled branches. She must have been taking Thornpaw out.

Poolpelt turned from the tunnel and headed for her den.
It seemed odd for Silverstar to take Thornpaw out today.
Wouldn't she want to stay in the camp and do her normal visit to the nursery?
Perhaps it was an urgent mission.

She paused in the snowy clearing, still queasy but struggling to understand.
If the mission was urgent, why not take an experienced warrior instead of Thornpaw?

She shook her head, trying to clear it, but the movement only made it spin more.
Unsteadily she climbed up and crept back to her nest and gave in to the drowsiness dragging at her bones.
Aware in her sleep of the warriors moving around her, she half lifted her head. Her belly was sore, but the cramping had stopped.

"Go back to sleep," Feathershine was whispering in her ear. "I'll explain to Icefrost that you're sick."

Too tired to argue, Poolpelt rested her muzzle on her black paws. Then she remembered with a start. "Duskwing?"
"I think she's okay," Feathershine murmured.
Poolpelt closed her eyes.

It was cold in the den when she woke.
Greenleaf snow flowed down on the edges of the entrance to the warrior den, cooling their nests.

Panting, Poolpelt crawled outside and climbed down, breathing the cooler air that wafted across the clearing.
The sun shone high in the sky, and the clearing was empty apart from Stormclaw picking through the fresh-kill pile and Briarpool pacing outside the apprentices's den.
Poolpelt's belly felt as though she'd swallowed thistle, but her head was clearer.

She looked toward the nursery, wondering how Duskwing and her kits were doing. As she watched, Owlpaw slid out. Her pelt was unkempt and her eyes dull.
Poolpelt hurried across the clearing. "How are they?" Her voice rasped in her throat. Owlpaw looked at her, surprised.
"Are you okay?"
"Bad belly."
She sighed. "Icepaw and Amberpaw, too."

She stopped to greet Briarpool. "You wanted me to look at them?"
Briarpool glanced apologetically at her paws. "I know you've been busy, but I'm worried. Icepaw can hardly stand."

Owlpaw nodded and pushed her way into the apprentices's den.
"What about the kits?" Poolpelt called after her.
"Alive." Her reply was flat. "For now, at least."

Poolpelt glanced at Briarpool. "She doesn't sound hopeful."
Briarpool was gazing anxiously after the apprentice medicine cat, clearly more worried about her kit than Duskwing's.

"I had the same bellyache," Poolpelt told her, "and I'm feeling better."
Briarpool jerked her head around. "Did you?"
"We shared a mouse," Poolpelt explained. "It must have been bad."
Briarpool shook her head. "Amberpaw's pretty ill, but Icepaw..." the warrior's voice trailed away.
"She'll recover," Poolpelt reassured her.
"I've never seen her so sick."

Stone scraped as Owlpaw nosed her way out of the apprentices's den. "Herbs would be pointless until they stop being sick. Just make sure they have plenty of water to drink. Find some moss and soak it in the freshest water you can find."
Briarpool nodded and headed for the stone tunnel.

"How are you?" Owlpaw asked Poolpelt.
Poolpelt shrugged. "Just sore and tired."
"Go and ask Flowertail for herbs to sooth your belly," Owlpaw glanced at the nursery. Her eyes glittered with worry.

"Do the kits have names?" Poolpelt asked.
"The she-kits are Maplekit and Needlekit, and the tom is Shadowkit."
"*Shadow*kit?" *Like the ferocious ancient Clan, ShadowClan?*
"He's the weakest of the three," Owlpaw mewed bleakly. "I suppose she hopes he's a fighter from the start." His eyes darkened. "He'll need to be."

"Will Duskwing be okay?"
"She's lost blood, but there's no sign of infection," Owlpaw reported. "She'll recover with rest." She looked weary.

"Have you slept at all?" Poolpelt asked.
She shook her head.

"Why don't you rest now?" Poolpelt suggested. "That camp's quiet, and Briarpool's taking care of Icepaw and Amberpaw."
Owlpaw nodded. "Go and get those herbs from Flowertail," she reminded her. "Then I'll have one less cat to worry about." She padded to the shade of Highrock and lay down.

Poolpelt headed along towards the medicine cat den.
"Flowertail!" Poolpelt guessed she was sleeping in her den.
Two eyes appeared in the hole.
Poolpelt tensed.
"Flowertail?" She ventured shakily.

The medicine cat padded out, her pelt ruffled. "What is it?"
"Owlpaw sent me for herbs for my belly. I shared a bad mouse with Icepaw and Amberpaw last night."
"You as well?" She rolled her eyes.
Poolpelt nodded.

"Evil omens."
Poolpelt wondered if she'd heard the medicine cat correctly.
She was muttering as she went inside her den and still muttering as she came out and shoved a pawful of shredded leaves in front of her.
"It was just a bad mouse," she meowed, wondering why she was so upset.
Flowertail leaned toward her. "Just a bad mouse?" She echoed.
"What if it was a omen? I should of seen it!"
"How?" Poolpelt backed away. "It didn't taste bad." She realized that Flowertail's pelt wasn't ruffled from being ungroomed, but from sleep.
She took another pace back. "It was just a bad mouse," she repeated.

Flowertail turned a disbelieving look on her. "How can you—you of all cats—ignore the signs?" she spat.
"Me?" What did she mean?
"You have a prophecy hanging over your head like a hawk. You're the bluest flames, and only sun and teeth can destroy you! You can't ignore the signs."
"B-but... I'm just a warrior."

Was she supposed to have the insight of a medicine cat? That wasn't fair. She should be giving her answers, not taunting her with the promise of a destiny she didn't understand.
She had wondered when Flowertail would again speak to her about the prophecy, but now she was making even less sense than before.

"*Just* a warrior?" Her whiskers trembled. "Too many omens. Three

cats poisoned, two only whiskers from StarClan. The kits may not make it through another night. The tom is too weak to mew, let alone feed."
What in StarClan is she talking about?
Poolpelt backed out of the den.

Only whiskers from StarClan.
She dashed to the apprentices's den. Were Icepaw and Amberpaw *that* ill?
Pushing through the stone as stone scraped, she saw the two apprentices curled in their nests, pelts damp.

Amberpaw raised her head. "Hello, Poolpelt."
Icepaw didn't stir.
Poolpelt padded to Amberpaw and licked the top of her head. "How are you?"
"I've felt better," she croaked.
"Has Briarpool brought you water yet?"
Amberpaw shook her head. "Owlpaw said you were sick, too."
Poolpelt nodded. "I'm feeling better now and so will you."
She glanced at Icepaw. The white she-cat with pale grey paws had began to writhe and groan, her eyes still closed. "You *both* will," she promised, hoping it was true.

The stone wall scraped as Briarpool padded through. Dripping moss dangled from her jaws.
She placed a wad beside Amberpaw and another beside Icepaw, Amberpaw lapped gratefully, but Icepaw still didn't budge.
Briarpool licked Icepaw fiercely. "Come on, Ice," she encouraged. "Wake up and wet your tongue."
Icepaw struggled to open her eyes. Sniffing at the moss, she lapped at it feebly, then gagged, unable even to keep the water down.

"I'll get Owlpaw," Poolpelt offered.
Briarpool shook her head. "She's sleeping." She stroked Icepaw with her tail as the young cat closed her eyes once more.
"I'll watch over these two." She glanced at Poolpelt. "You should get some fresh air," she suggested. "Outside the ravine."
The stench of the sick apprentices's den was making Poolpelt uneasy belly churn. "Okay."

She headed outside of the stone den, relieved to feel clean fur on her face. The snowy forest air would be even fresher. She headed out of the camp, glancing at Owlpaw where she slept in the shadow of Highrock.

The climb up the ravine left her breathless. She was thankful for the cold breeze wafting through the snowy forest, and she wandered among the snowy trees feeling glad to be away from the sickness and worry of camp.
Birds called to one another, their song echoing through the snowy trees.
Frozen leaves brushed Poolpelt's pelt as she padded along the familiar tracks with fallen frozen leaves.

The shadows darkening her thoughts began to fade.
StarClan would protect them.

A butterfly fluttered a few tail-lengths ahead, buffeted by the breeze.
Suddenly, the frozen ferns trembled, and a bulky golden-brown shape exploded from the icy stalks.

"Got you!" Thornpaw leaped for the butterfly, paws flailing, but the insect jerked upward out of his reach. "Fox dung."
He dropped into all four paws and watched the butterfly disappear through the snowy branches.
His eyes were sparkling, and he clawed excitedly at the snow, muttering to himself, "I'll get the next one!"
Then he spotted Poolpelt. "Hi!" he mewed cheerfully.

Where's Silverstar?
Poolpelt tasted the air: no sign of the IceClan leader.
She narrowed her eyes. She and Thornpaw left the camp together.

"What are you doing?" Had Silverstar sent him hunting? Wouldn't Ashfall be wondering where her apprentice went?
Thornpaw stared at her, blinking. "Doing?" There was an awkwardness in his mew, as if he was suddenly on the defensive. "Nothing, really. I just missed that butterfly."

"Where's Silverstar?" She prompted.

Thornpaw opened and closed his mouth. "Silverstar?"
"You know, Silverstar." Poolpelt tried to ease the awkwardness by joking. "Silver she-cat? Clan leader? You went out with her this morning."

"Did I?" Thornpaw shifted his paws. "I mean, you saw us go?"
Poolpelt didn't want Thornpaw to think she'd been spying. "I smelled your scent while I was going to the dirtplace. It just seemed odd that you went out before the dawn patrol."
Thornpaw's gaze flittered around the snowy forest, resting on anything but Poolpelt. "Well, Silverstar wanted an early start. Training."
"Oh." Poolpelt wasn't convinced. *Training you to catch butterflies?* She resisted the question. "Did it go well?"

"Fine!" Thornpaw circled restlessly. "More than fine. Great. Silverstar's great. She's brilliant."
Poolpelt tipped her head to one side. "So where is she now?"
"She's in her way back. I...she...she said I couldn't tell any cat what she'd done." Thornpaw shut his mouth, eyes round with dismay. "I mean, where we were." He looked at his paws. "Sorry. Secret."

He scampered past Poolpelt, and she felt his pelt pricking up as it brushed hers. She let him escape into the snowy trees without trying to stop him.
Then a scent touched her tongue.
A familiar scent.
She thought for a moment. What was it?
Catmint! Thornpaw's pelt smelled of catmint.

Had they been to Twolegplace? Was that the "secret"?
Her black paws prickled. Had they hunted at Twolegplace? Surely Silverstar wasn't encouraging the apprentices to hunt at Twolegplace?
Her fears rose. *Surely* Silverstar won't encourage apprentices to mingle with kittypets.
The whole Clan would be like Sunpaw.
I won't let that happen, she thought fiercely.
She dashed after Thornpaw.

Thornpaw was already halfway down the ravine.

She scrabbled down the rocks after him.

"Hey!" Hawkflame's yowl sounded below. "Stop throwing rocks!"
She skidded to a halt, realizing that her black paws were sending showers of stones down the slope. "Sorry!" she called.
She waited while Hawkflame led his patrol up the trail past her.
"Be more careful next time," Hawkflame scolded.
Poolpelt hung her head as Snowheart, Swiftfur, and Braveheart filed after him.
"Don't worry," Braveheart whispered. "We've all done it."

As soon as they'd gone, Poolpelt scrambled down the ravine, more carefully this time.
She headed into the clearing and saw Thornpaw settling down with a piece of prey.
At least he was alone.

Where did he get prey? From Twolegplace?
Had Silverstar got him to hunt there?

The stone tunnel scraped, and Silverstar padded into camp.
Fox dung!

The IceClan leader looked calm, her pelt smooth and smelled strongly of bracken as if she had been rolling in fresh ferns.
Why?
It was obvious.
To get rid of the scent of catmint and Twolegs!
How could she? She was their *leader,* for StarClan's sake!

Silverstar headed straight for the nursery.
Flowertail slid out as she approached. "Duskwing's sleeping," she told the IceClan leader. "The kits, too, since they've had some milk at last."
Silverstar twitched the tip of her tail. "Can I see them?"
Flowertail stood aside. "The tom's the weakest," she warned as Silverstar padded into the nursery.

Briarpool padded over to join Swiftfur. "About time, too," she meowed, not bothering to keep her voice quiet. "If Duskwing's kits had died in the night, they'd have gone to StarClan without even

meeting their Clan leader."

Poolpelt glanced at her black paws.
She wasn't the only cat in IceClan questioning Silverstar's loyalty.

But she suspected she was the only one who knew just how far from the warrior code she was straying.

Chapter 22

A few sunrises later, Poolpelt approached Icefrost, who was washing below Highrock.

"I'll go on the sunhigh patrol," she offered, relieved to catch her before she called the Clan together to assign duties for the day.
The IceClan deputy blinked. "You've been volunteering for a lot of patrols lately. Have you forgotten how to hunt?"
Poolpelt paused.
She was hoping she hadn't noticed she'd been tagging to any border patrol she could.

She wanted to check any signs of Silverstar.
It seems her condition has gotten worst, she has gotten more boneier. Her ribs were showing now.
Also, she'd want to check if she's still hunting in Twolegplace.
There's been no scent of her on the Twoleg border so far, and she was beginning to wonder if she'd let her imagination run away with her.

"I just like patrolling," she told Icefrost lamely. "But I'll hunt instead, if you like."
"Perhaps you might find it a little more interesting if you *led* a hunting patrol," Icefrost suggested.
Poolpelt pricked her ears. "Yes, please!"
"Good." Icefrost signaled with her tail.

As the Clan gathered, worry fluttered in Poolpelt's belly.
She'd never led a patrol before.
Would she know what to do?
Would she have to decide where to hunt, what prey to chase, how much to catch?

"Fine weather again," Briarfang observed as he padded towards the IceClan deputy.

Blackpaw was at his heels, eager for any assignment that took him closer for being a warrior.
The other warriors and apprentices padded after them.
Briarpool was licking her lips; swallowing the last of her meal, while Bladewing kept bending to lick his chest; his morning wash was clearly not finished.

Icepaw was not with Ravenbird.
For three sunsets she'd lain in her nest, too weak to move, unable to eat.
Briarpool had taken to sleeping outside the apprentices's den, too worried to leave her ailing kit.
Ravenbird had kept himself so busy helping Rainpelt with Amberpaw's training that the dark-ginger tabby she-cat apprentice had passed two assessments in as many days.

Thornpaw was sick with envy.
"She'll be a warrior before me!" he complained.
"She started her training before you," Poolpelt had pointed out.

"Feathershine!"
Icefrost's mew snapped Poolpelt from her thoughts.
"You'll patrol the DawnClan border with Braveheart, Rainpelt, Hawkflame, and Crowfur."

"Bladewing and Amberpaw, you check the SmokeClan border with Dawnstripe."
Icefrost glanced at Briarpool, hollow-eyed beside the apprentices's den.
Was she wondering if she'd be better off patrolling than fretting over her kit?
Her gaze flicked back to her assembled Clanmates.

"Briarfang, Blackpaw, Ravenbird, and Snowheart."
The cats straightened as she called their names. "You will hunt."
Blackpaw circled his mentor, tail up.

"Poolpelt will lead the patrol," Icefrost added.
"What?" Blackpaw stared at Poolpelt.
"You heard me." Icefrost padded away to join Briarpool, leaving Poolpelt to face the black apprentice's disbelieving stare.

Blackpaw cocked his head to one side. "So where are we going to hunt?"
"Snakerocks." Poolpelt blurted out the first place that came into her head.
Briarfang watched her coolly. "Risky," he meowed. "But it might be worth it. No cat has hunted there for moons."
"Because it's infested with adders and foxes," Blackpaw sneered.
"You're not scared, are you?" Poolpelt teased.

She glanced at Snowheart and Ravenbird. "Ready?"
Ravenbird nodded and Snowheart shifted the snow with her paw as if she couldn't wait to get moving.

"Good." Poolpelt headed for the stone tunnel, praying her patrol was following.
As she padded out of the camp she heard, with relief, paw steps following behind.
She led her Clanmates up the ravine and into the snowy forest.

"Why are we taking the long route?" Blackpaw called as Poolpelt headed into a gully toward Snakerocks.
Poolpelt hesitated, suddenly doubting her sense of directions.
"This way's not so steep," Snowheart meowed. "And it's softer on the paws."
"Yeah, right." Blackpaw muttered.

Poolpelt pressed on.
"Why don't we take this shortcut?" Blackpaw scampered ahead of her and leaped onto a fallen snow-covered log. He flicked his tail toward a thick snow-filled bramble.
"We'd lose our pelts in there," Poolpelt replied.
"Just fall in behind, Blackpaw," Briarfang ordered. "Save your energy for hunting."
Blackpaw padded sulkily to the back of the patrol.

Ahead of them, a snow-filled branch rustled with life.
Poolpelt halted and crouched, signaling for her patrol to copy her.
There was no harm in bagging a bird or two on the way.
She crept slowly forwary, eyeing the frozen leaves as they twitched to reveal a small song thrush.

"Are we hunting at Snakerocks or what?" Blackpaw mewed.
The thrush fluttered up into the higher branches calling on alarm.
"Blackpaw!" Ravenbird scolded. "Now every piece of prey will know we're here."
But Briarfang had already turned on his apprentice. "We're hunting for the Clan!" he hissed.
Blackpaw crouched apologetically as Briarfang bared his teeth.
"Come on," she sighed. "Let's get to Snakerocks."

They arrived at the snowy rocky outcrop.
She sniffed the air, remembering the fox that had chased her and Feathershine last time they'd been there.
No fresh stench.

She padded to the clearing at the foot of the rocks. "You guard here," she ordered Blackpaw. "Tell me if you scent danger. We'll look for prey up there." She nodded toward the wall of boulders rising behind them.
Glancing around the rest of the patrol, she added, "Don't forget, there might be adders hiding in the crevices."

Ravenbird and Snowheart nodded.
Briarfang watched her, his expression impossible to read.
Poolpelt felt very uncomfortable giving instructions to senior warriors, but Icefrost had put her in charge of the patrol and she was determined to do things properly.

"Why do *I* have to be guard?" Blackpaw complained. "It's boring."
Briarfang lashed his tail. "Because you proved back there that hunting is the last thing on your mind today."
Blackpaw silently flicked a frozen leaf with his paw, but didn't argue.

Poolpelt leaped up the rocks, her mouth open to taste the air for prey signs.
Ravenbird disappeared under the frozen undergrowth while Briarfang and Snowheart each took a different route up the boulders.

Mouse.
She scented it a moment before she saw a shadow flicker in the

crevice between two boulders.
Pricking her ears to check for slither of scales, she crouched.
No sign of any snakes.
She shot a forepaw down the fissure and hooked out the mouse.

Killing it quickly, she tossed it down onto the snow beside Blackpaw.
"Guard it, don't eat it," she told him.
Blackpaw rolled his eyes, but she just turned and climbed to the top of the rocks.

Something white was twitching beneath a frozen bush ahead.
Poolpelt tensed and dropped into her hunting crouch. Drawing herself silently forward, she breathed in so her belly didn't crunch the snow. The rabbit scent made her mouth water.
It bobbed deeper into the frozen bush.

Poolpelt followed, slowly pushing her head between the leaves.
There it was, grazing on the frozen berries from the bottom.
Poolpelt unsheathed her claws, stilled her tail, and leaped.

She landed squarely on the rabbit and made the killing bite before it realized what was happening.
A twitch, then another, and it was dead.
Poolpelt dragged it out from the frozen bush, pleased at the weight of it.
It would feed the elders and Duskwing.

"Watch out! DOG!" Blackpaw's shout pierced her ear fur. There was fear in his wail.
Poolpelt's pelt stood on end as she smelled the dog stench and heard giant clumsy paws thundering on the snowy floor only tail-lengths away.

With the rabbit still in her jaws she launched herself at the nearest tree trunk, scrabbling it up like a squirrel, her neck straining from the weight of her catch.
Jaws snapped below her and she flicked her tail out of the way just in time as the dog jumped around the base of the tree, snarling and snapping, its eyes wild with excitement.
Poolpelt scrambled higher, her claws gouging bark, sending it

showering down as the dog stretched its forepaws higher up the trunk.

Heart thudding, she scanned the snowy forest.
She could make out Snowheart's white pelt on a snowy branch of a tree nearby.

"Blackpaw!" Briarfang was calling.
"Up here." The answer came from somewhere level with her head, and Poolpelt guessed the apprentice was safely up a snowy tree as well.
She was relieved when Briarfang yowled Ravenbird's name and Ravenbird replied, sounding breathless but intact.
"Safe!"

"Poolpelt?" Briarfang was calling for her now.
Poolpelr tightened the grip on the rabbit, unable to reply.
How could she get down?
This dog would never give up the promise of cat and rabbit.
The blood tang must already be singing on its tongue.

A Twoleg barked.
The dog froze, then growled with annoyance as the Twoleg barked again.
Whining, the dog finally dropped to the ground and lolloped away.

Her jaws ached from the pull of the rabbit, Poolpelt waited until the swishing of both Twoleg and dog had faded; then slowly, shakily, she let herself drop, paw over paw, down the trunk.
She landed on all four feet, claws burning, and hurried to the top of Snakerocks.

"Poolpelt!"
Her Clanmates were circling in the snowy clearing below, calling anxiously.
Quickly, she bounded down the rocks and flung the rabbit at their paws. "Sorry," she panted. "Couldn't answer before."
Snowheart's eyes glowed. "Nice catch!"

Ravenbird trotted to the roots of an ash tree and dug a sparrow from the snow.

Briarfang scooted up Snakerocks and retrieved a freshly killed shrew just between boulders.

"What about my mouse?" Poolpelt asked Blackpaw. Her heart was slowing down and her legs had stopped trembling.
"Don't worry, it's safe," Blackpaw replied, his eyes glittering. He dug in the snow ad un-snowed the mouse.
"Well done," Poolpelt congratulated him. "I think we have enough."

"Back to camp?" Snowheart asked.
Poolpelt nodded. She picked up her rabbit and headed back toward the ravine.

Blackpaw was muttering under his breath as she passed him.
"What's the point of making me guard if no one takes any notice?"
"I climbed a tree as soon as you yowled," Ravenbird objected.
"Stop complaining." Briarfang shooed his apprentice forward. "We all escaped."
"*And* kept our prey," Snowheart added.

Poolpelt's neck was aching from the weight of the rabbit by the time they neared the ravine.
She was trying her best not to let it drag along the ground, but the closer they got, the more its pelt scruffed the snow.
She couldn't wait to drop it in the fresh-kill pile.

Blackpaw raced into the lead as they reached the edge and scooted first down the snowy cliff.
Poolpelt thumped down after him, the rabbit swinging awkwardly from her jaws.

"Listen!" Blackpaw skidded to a halt in front of her, and she almost crashed into him, her face full of rabbit fur.
"Whaf?" She mumbled.
Blackpaw's ears were pricked, his pelt bristling. "I can hear something."
The rest of the patrol had stopped behind Poolpelt.
"Me too," Snowheart hissed.

Briarfang was scenting the air as Poolpelt turned to look back up the path. "It's that dog!" he warned. "It's coming back."

Ravenbird spun around. "It can smell the rabbit."

Paws thudded over the snowy forest floor near the top of the ravine; snow swished. The dog was charging toward them, fast.
"It mustn't find the camp!" Briarfang growled.

Poolpelt pictured the dog rampaging through the dens; Duskwing's kits would never survive.
She dropped the rabbit. "I'll take this to the top and leave it. It might be enough to stop the dog following."
"Good plan." Briarfang nodded. "Ravenbird, warn the Clan. Get warriors to guard the entrance in case the dog does follow."
As Ravenbird hared away, Poolpelt picked up the rabbit and began to shoulder past her Clanmates, praying that leaving her catch would be enough to distract the dog.

"No!" Blackpaw's angry yowl made her freeze. "We caught that rabbit. We're going to keep it."
He bounded past Poolpelt and disappeared over the top.
"Blackpaw!" Briarfang chased him up the stack of boulders.
Poolpelt tossed the rabbit at Snowheart's paws. "If the dog comes over the top, leave it here. It might stop it."
She pelted after Briarfang, bounding up the rock and over the edge of the ravine in time to see the dog crash from the frozen undergrowth.

Blackpaw faced it, his back arched and his tail bushed out.
As the dog lunged at him, he swiped a forepaw across its muzzle, then aimed another slice at its eye.
Blood sprayed the snow.

Yelping, the dog sprang back and bared its teeth before lunging again.
This time Blackpaw swerved, diving under its belly and twisting to rake it with hind claws.
The dog howled with rage, but Blackpaw was ready, rearing up, his claws glistening with blood.
He swiped again at the dog's muzzle, batting it with blow after blow until the dog began to back away.

"Run back to your Twoleg!" Blackpaw hissed, aiming a vicious

swipe that missed the snapping jaws by a whisker but sliced open the dog's nose.
Howling, the dog turned and fled into the snowy forest.

Briarfang's eyes were wide. "Blessed StarClan!" he breathed.
Blackpaw stared triumphantly at his mentor. "There was no way it was going to steal Clan prey."

Poolpelt blinked. She'd never seen such courage.
She stepped back, speechless, as Blackpaw shouldered past.

Hawkflame, Darkcloud, Icefrost, and Silverstar were standing with their hackles up at the base of the ravine.
They watched in amazement as Blackpaw bounded down the snowy cliff.

"The dog's gone," he announced, hardly out of breath, before brushing past them and heading for the stone tunnel.
Poolpelt picked up the rabbit and followed.
While Blackpaw accepted the praise of his Clanmates, she quietly placed it on the fresh-kill pile.

"He nearly sliced off it's nose," Briarfang was boasting.
"How big was it?" Darkcloud breathed.
"Bigger than a badger," Blackpaw mewed.

Stormclaw and Swiftwing padded from the elders's den.
"He fought a dog?" Stormclaw gasped. "No Clan cat's tried that since ThunderClan walked the forest."

Silverstar leaped onto the Highrock, despite her blood-shot eyes and bonier structure. "Clanmates!" she called. "I can think of no better moment to give Blackpaw his warrior name."
The Clan cheered its approval.
Silverstar leaped down from Highrock to meet Blackpaw in the center of the snowy clearing. "Step forward, young tom."

"A warrior already," Crowclaw murmured proudly.
Briarpool glanced over her shoulder at the apprentices's den.

Icepaw's drawn face poked out, her eyes shining as she watched her

brother.
Icepaw drew her frail body from the stone den and crouched down, trembling, just outside the den.

Silverstar looked down at Blackpaw. "Blackpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend your Clan, even at the cost of your life?"
Blackpaw dipped his head. "I do."
Silverstar purred. "Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior name. Blackpaw, from this moment you will be known as Blackfrost. StarClan honors your courage and strength, and we welcome you as a full warrior of IceClan. Serve your Clan well."
She pressed her muzzle to Blackfrost's head.

Blackfrost gazed proudly around at his Clanmates as Feathershine hurried to his side and pressed her muzzle against his, purring.

Icefrost padded to her fresh-kill pile and began tossing pieces of prey to her Clanmates. "If this doesn't call for a feast, nothing does," she meowed, flinging the rabbit at Swiftwing's paws.
The elder's eyes sparkled.
Stormclaw nudged her aside. "I hope you're going to share that!"

Swiftfur took a blackbird to the nursery for Duskwing, slipping out a moment later to join Briarfang and Bladewing.
The Clan shared the fresh-kill and listened to the elders's stories till the moon was high overhead.

Eventually Silverstar yawned and got to her paws.
The Clan cats fell silent as their leader gazed around the clearing.
"I could not be more proud of my Clan," she began.
Poolpelt narrowed her eyes. Blackfrost's warrior ceremony was over, and it was unlike Silverstar to make unnecessary speeches.
"Thank you, all of you." Dipping her head, she ducked away and disappeared into her den.

It almost sounds as though she was saying goodbye.
She'd overheard Swiftwing telling Stormclaw that Silverstar was on her last life.
Perhaps that's why the Clan leader had sounded so somber.
Each battle could be her last.

Poolpelt got to her paws, her neck aching again, and headed for her den again.

Feathershine was already there, circling into her nest.
Blackfrost was curled on the stone beside her.
He'd have to build himself a nest tomorrow, and Poolpelt guessed with a purr where he'd built it.

She shivered, missing the comfort of her sister's pelt.
Feathershine used to press against Poolpelt's pelt, keeping her warm with her fluffy pale-white fur, but at least she gets to sleep with her mate now.

She looked at the night sky, thinking of a handsome, golden-tabby tom.
If Feathershine was able to get a mate, was it possible for Poolpelt as well?

Chapter 23

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"SHE WON'T WAKE UP! SHE WON'T WAKE UP!"
Briarpool's terrified mew rang around the sleeping camp.
Poolpelt shot out of her nest.
Icepaw!

She knew instinctively the moment she reached the snowy clearing and Briarpool's wild eyes that the pale white apprentice was dead.

"I've licked and shaken her and she won't open her eyes!" The queen cried out in anguish.

The Clan cats were hurrying from their dens, blinking in the predawn light, as Poolpelt pushed her way into the apprentices's den and crouched beside Icepaw's nest.
She pressed her muzzle into her former denmate's fur.
The strange stillness of her body and the coldness of her pelt pierced Poolpelt's heart.

Flashes of memories flashed through her.

"Whiteclaw! It's me, Poolpaw!"

"Why won't they get up?"

"It was all a mistake. You don't have to be dead."

"Why did you have to make them asleep! They're dead!"

"They have left me. I don't want them to be in StarClan. I want them to be here, where I can see them and talk to them."

She sighed. Oh, she should of known how worthless all that sadness

and anger was.

"Icepaw," she whispered, knowing the apprentice couldn't hear her. "Icepaw." Grief blurred her gaze, she rested her chin on Icepaw's flank.

The stone scraped, and Flowertail came into the den.
Poolpelt lifted her head and stared at the apprentice medicine cat.
"She's dead."
"She'll be with StarClan now," Flowertail murmured. She pressed her muzzle to Poolpelt's head as though guessing her thoughts. "Whiteclaw and Raindapple will look after her."
But we'll never hunt together.

Flowertail nudged her gently. "Wait outside, please," she mewed.
Poolpelt padded from the stone den and saw the eyes of her Clan flashing in the half-light.

Briarpool stared at her and spoke in a dull voice. "She's dead, isn't she?"
Blackfrost joined them, his tail trailing. "Can I see her?" he asked.
Briarpool touched the top of his head lightly with her tail. "Of course, little one. Wish your sister well on her journey to our ancestors."
Blackfrost dipped his head and padded into the den.

A tiny mew sounded outside the nursery.
Poolpelt peered past the pelts of her Clanmates and saw a tiny white and black tom sitting at the edge of the snowy clearing.

Icefrost padded forward to greet him. "Hey, there! Are you Shadowkit?"
The kit stared straight past him at the somber gathering of cats. "What's going on?" he squeaked.
"Icepaw's dead," Icefrost told him gravely.
Shadowkit looked sad for a moment, then tipped his head to one side. "Was she a warrior?"

"Shadowkit!" Swiftfur hopped out of the nursery. "What are you doing out here?"
"I wanted to know why everyone was awake," Shadowkit replied.

Swiftfur licked his head. "I can see you're going to be a curious one."
She glanced at Icefrost. "He was the weakest of the litter."
"But I'm strong now!" Shadowkit protested, opening his tiny pink mouth wide indignation.
"Of course, little one." Swiftfur scooped him up by the scruff and carried him, paws churning, back into the nursery.

Owlpaw padded from the stone tunnel. "What's going on?"
Briarpool looked at Owlpaw. "Icepaw's dead."
Owlpaw sighed. "When StarClan calls, even the best medicine cat cannot heal."
Flowertail appeared from the nursery. "Owlpaw's right," she mewed. "We did all we could."

Bladewing pressed against Briarpool. "I'll help you prepare Icepaw for the vigil," she murmured.
Briarpool blinked. "Yes." She stood up. "I'll get rosemary."

Poolpelt turned away.
She could not bear to see another cat prepared for the journey to StarClan.

She felt Icefrost's muzzle brush her shoulder.
"Come with me," she ordered. "I'm taking you to the dawn patrol."
She nodded to Thornpaw. "You can come, too."
Amberpaw stepped forward. "Can I?"
"Of course." Icefrost brushed her tail along the flank of the apprentice.
"Rainpelt?" She signaled to Amberpaw's mentor. "Call Swiftfur and join us."

Poolpelt's paws were heavy as she padded through the tunnel behind the Clan deputy and the rest of the patrol, but she was relieved to leave her mourning Clanmates behind.

Once they'd reach the top of the ravine and headed into the snowy forest, Icefrost fell in beside her.
"I know Icepaw's death is sad," she meowed quietly. "But the Clan must carry on. The borders must be guarded and the fresh-kill pile must remain stocked."
Poolpelt felt heavy inside, as if her belly were filled with stones.

But Icefrost was right.
She had to protect her Clan, however much pain she was in.
The other cats were suffering, too.

The patrol moved slowly through the snowy trees.
No one spoke as they neared the border with Icerocks.
The sun had lifted over the horizon, and it's pale light filtered through the snowy trees.

Birds were stirring, their calls filling the snowy forest with song.
Poolpelt wished they'd shut up.
Don't be frost-brained! she told herself. *How are they suppose to know or care that Icepaw is dead?*

"Wait!" Icefrost's hiss surprised her, and she froze with one front paw still in the air.
The IceClan deputy was sniffing the breeze, the fur lifting along her spine. "DawnClan!"
Poolpelt scanned the snowy trees along the edge of the snowy forest and saw Icerocks glowing in the dawn light.
DawnClan scent was drifting over the border, stronger than before.

"Look!" Swiftfur had dropped into a crouch. "They've crossed the border!"
Poolpelt bristled when she spotted the tip of a sleek, oily tail, then another.
The tang of warm scents bathed her tongue.
Snow-filled branches swished as a DawnClan patrol moved stealthily through the frozen undergrowth.

"I knew it!" Icefrost growled.
Keeping low so that her light-grey tabby pelt was hidden by the frozen ferns, she signaled to Thornpaw. "Go back to the camp and tell Silverstar we're being invaded! Those DawnClan warriors have deliberately crossed the border. We can't let them get away with it. Silverstar needs to send a fighting patrol here at once."
Thornpaw nodded and whipped around.
He squeezed past Poolpelt and Rainpelt and pelted back along the trail that led to the ravine.

"Get back!" Icefrost ordered the rest of the patrol, keeping her mew

low.
She scooted onto thick frozen ferns and the patrol followed, crouching among the fronds.
Anger raged in Poolpelt's belly. Why should they have to hide in their own territory?
"We'll attack as soon as the backup patrol gets here," Icefrost breathed.

The DawnClan patrol was moving more clumsily and shivering now that they'd reach the snow.
She heard one cat curse and imagined the snow scrunching up the frost-brain DawnClan paw-pads.
They weren't use to the shivering snow, or the cold climate.
Let it freeze them! She thought fiercely, unsheathing her claws.
She scowled at the DawnClan stench. "They're leaving markers!" she growled to Icefrost. "On *our* territory!"

"They don't know which way to head," Swiftfur observed.
The DawnClan patrol was struggling through the snow, heading away from the ravine.

"What's their plan?" Amberpaw asked.
Icefrost paused, considering the situation. "There aren't enough of them to attack the camp—and if that's their aim, they're going the wrong way, thanks StarClan. My guess is that they're looking for a patrol to attack."

"But why?" Poolpelt struggled to understand what DawnClan could possibly gain by sending a few warriors, and so unprepared, into rival territory.
"They want to prove that this part of the forest is theirs."

"Never!" Poolpelt fought the urge to race out of the snowy bushes and hurl herself at the DawnClan patrol.
But what could she alone do against a whole patrol?
But she was supposed to be fire, blazing through the forest!
Perhaps she should attack like Blackfrost had attacked that dog.

Icefrost must have sensed her black paws shifting restlessly. "We'll attack as soon as the other patrol gets here," she promised.

Frozen ferns rustled behind them, and Braveheart pushed his way through. "We've seen the DawnClan patrol," he reported, "but they didn't see us. They're too busy fighting the snow."
Icefrost chuckled. "I get the feeling they're not too comfortable on IceClan territory."
"We should force them to fight where the snow is the deepest," Braveheart suggested.
"Won't that make it harder to attack?" Swiftfur questioned.
"Hard for us, but even harder for them," Icefrost answered. "They're not used to snow, and we are."

Icefrost glanced at Braveheart. "Who did you bring?"
"Hawkflame, Blackfrost, Springleaf, Feathershine, Crowclaw, and Ravenbird," Braveheart reported. "There's another patrol waiting at the top of the ravine, in case DawnClan breaks through our line. We didn't know how many warriors DawnClan had brought."
Icefrost narrowed her eyes. "We have enough to drive them off."

Blackfrost shouldered his way to the front. "We should do more than drive them off," he growled. "We should give them a battle they won't forget in a hurry."
"Once we know we can drive them away, they'll think twice about invading again," Icefrost pointed out.

Icefrost swung her head around to Hawkflame. "We'll split into three patrols. You head one and meet them on the rise up there." She signaled to the slope where the DawnClan cats seemed to be heading. "Take Ravenbird and Swiftfur. You attack first. We'll come in from the sides as you drive them back."

Icefrost swung her head to Crowclaw. "Crowclaw?"
The black warrior lifted his chin. "Yes?"
"Stay here with Springleaf, Braveheart, and Blackfrost. Attack when you hear Hawkflame's signal."

She went on. "I'll take Poolpelt, Feathershine, Amberpaw, and Rainpelt to attack their other flank. We'll leave the path to the border clear so they can retreat."

"We should shred them where they fall, not let them escape," Blackfrost hissed.

Icefrost glared at him. "Warriors do not need to shred blood to win battles."

She slid through the frozen ferns, and Poolpelt followed Feathershine at her heels.
Icefrost led them toward the ravine and doubled back, using another route, until they could see the DawnClan warriors fighting their way out of the snow.

Poolpelt heard one of the warriors hissing. "What do we want such stupid territory for?"
"More prey for DawnClan, less for IceClan." That was Pineclaw, DawnClan's newest deputy, ever since Emberstar passed and joined StarClan. "Now stop fussing and keep moving."
Why in StarClan did Sparrowstar choose that arrogant furball to be deputy!? Poolpelt thought fiercely.

Poolpelt peered over the low, frozen bushes.
The wind was with them, blowing DawnClan's scent over Hawkflame's patrol as it waited to ambush.
As DawnClan headed up the slope, Poolpelt saw the frozen ferns quiver where Crowclaw's patrol crouched, ready for Hawkflame's signal.

The DawnClan patrol looked strong and fit.
Poolpelt bared her teeth. *We'll just have to fight harder, then.*

Creeping up the rise, ears flat, tails down, they halted at a flick of Pineclaw's tail. His hackles were up.
"I smell IceClan," he snarled coldly.

Foxflight, a reddish tabby she-cat with glossy fur, tasted the air. "Fresh scent."

The warrior looked over their shoulder. "Perhaps—!"
Foxflight didn't get a chance to finish her sentence.

Hawkflame launched himself at Pineclaw, yowling the signal. Swiftfur and Ravenbird hurtled after.
Foxflight reared up, Pineclaw ducked, and the other warriors spun around, their eyes wide, as Crowclaw's patrol exploded from the

frozen ferns to one side.

"Attack!' Icefrost screeched, pelting forward.

Poolpelt surged after her and flung herself onto the back of a DawnClan warrior.
She recognized the fiery tabby fur of Sparkshine as she dug her claws into her pelt.

Sparkshine shook her off and turned, rearing up.
There wasn't enough time to scramble to her black paws.
Poolpelt rolled out of the way a heartbeat before she crashed down where she'd fallen.

Poolpelt raked her claws down her flank as Sparkshine turned on her, her ears flattened.
She tried to duck but Sparkshine's blow came too fast.
A heavy forepaw swiped her muzzle, and pain shot through her.

As she stumbled and pressed a black paw to her bleeding nose, a pale white pelt flashed beside her.
Feathershine reared up and began battling Sparkshine hard, one paw after another.

Yes! Memories of Featherpaw stopping herself from killing Sunpaw flooded back to Poolpelt.
This is to make up how sorry I am, sister.

Poolpelt pushed herself up on her hind legs beside her sister and joined in.
Sparkshine staggered backwards, her flailing paws defending now, not attacking.
They drove her back into a frozen bramble bush.
She tripped as branches swarmed her hind legs, yowling when the cold thorns pierced her pelt.

Together Poolpelt and Feathershine dropped onto all four paws and, as one, began nipping at her.
Confused and panicking, Sparkshine struggled free of the brambles.
She leaped and turned, but Feathershine and Poolpelt pressed on with their attack, Feathershine biting her flank from one side, and,

when Sparkshine twisted to attack them, Poolpelt cuffing her from the other.
Screeching in rage, the fiery-pelted tabby she-cat jumped over their backs and hared away through the snowy trees.

"One down," Feathershine puffed.
"More to go," Poolpelt spun around, tasting the air.

She couldn't detect the scent of Goldenfur.
She quietly let out a sigh of relief.
She couldn't *bare* to having to fight Goldenfur.

She ducked out of the way as Crowclaw chased another DawnClan warrior, yelping, into the snowy trees.
Braveheart rolled past Poolpelt's black paws clutching Foxflight, clawing her spine with his hind claws until the DawnClan warrior yowled for mercy.

Hawkflame aimed a hefty swipe at Shimmeringpool and sent her bowling into her Clanmate.

Art drawn by ArenaTyke

The two cats lost their balance and Hawkflame jumped on them, clawing one of her forepaws while he sent the other one flying with a mighty kick from his hind legs.

"Fight, you mouse-hearts!" Pineclaw howled at his Clanmates, as Poolpelt sprang at him and landed on his back.
"Did you think it would be easy?" she hissed as she sank her teeth into the DawnClan deputy's shoulder.
Claws hooked Poolpelt in return, and Pineclaw managed to tear her off.
She yowled as her forepaw was wretched, its claw still tangled in Pineclaw's fur.
Sick with agony, she freed herself and spun around.

Foxflight faced her.
Gasping with pain, Poolpelt reared up to fight the she-cat, but Feathershine was already dragging her backward, sining her teeth

into her scruff.
As Foxflight toppled over, Poolpelt rushed at her belly, crashing into her so hard she heard the breath rush from her.
Gasping, Foxflight wriggled free and fled toward the DawnClan border.

A frightened shriek ripped the air.
"Amberpaw!" Poolpelt shot through the frozen brambles, slithering between the snow-filled branches with practiced ease.
Bursting out in the other side, she saw Amberpaw cornered between the roots of an oak by a warrior and an apprentice, Poppystream and Jumiperpaw.

Art drawn by ArenaTyke

Art drawn by ArenaTyke

"Pick on someone your own size!" Poolpelt yowled and flung herself onto Poppystream.

"DawnClan has never fought fair!" Feathershine's screech sounded behind her, and as Poolpelt tumbled Poppystream over, she saw her sister sink her claws into Juniperpaw's pelt and drag her away from the startled IceClan apprentice.

Her mouth choked with DawnClan fur, Poolpelt managed to yell at Amberpaw. "Go for her belly!"
Amberpaw lunged forward, thrashing at the she-cat with unsheathed claws until Poppystream twisted so hard in Poolpelt's grip, she had to let go.

Poppystream growled and swiped at Amberpaw, but the apprentice was too fast.
Amberpaw ducked out of the way, and the she-cat shredded bark instead.

"Can't move fast enough out of the sun, sun-face?" Poolpelt taunted her.
Poppystream hissed and lunged for her, but Amberpaw darted under her belly and threw her off balance.

Feathershine had already sent the other apprentice pelting into the frozen undergrowth.
Poppystream staggered to her paws to face three hissing she-cats, and Poolpelt felt a surge of satisfaction as panic filled her gaze. She backed down towards the roots as they advanced.

"Do you think you can take on all three of us?" Feathershine challenged.
"She could try," Amberpaw growled.
"She looks pretty frost-brained." Poolpelt felt power surge through her black paws, but she pressed down the urge to attack.
This warrior was outnumbered, they could easily beat her.
Which means we should let her escape.

She flashed a warning glance at her Clanmates, hoping they understood.
Feathershine nodded and stepped aside, leaving a gap in their ranks.
Without hesitating, Poppystream pelted through it and fled toward the border.

As Poolpelt slid back through the frozen brambles, she saw Icefrost kick out with her hind legs and send a DawnClan warrior reeling. Poolpelt dived out of the way just in time as the DawnClan warrior tumbled past her.

"Retreat!" Pineclaw yelped, and the remaining DawnClan warriors turned and fled. Their deputy paused, his eyes gleaming. "The rocks are still ours!"
"But never the forest," Icefrost snarled in return.

Exhilarated, Poolpelt chased the retreating warriors to the border.

"We'll have the rocks back, too, one day!" Blackfrost yowled as DawnClan splashed across the river, made shallow by greenleaf.

Icefrost lifted her muzzle. "Well fought." She gazed around at her Clanmates. "Any serious injuries?"
Poolpelt remembered her wretched claw, which was throbbing and swollen underneath. It hurt, but it could wait till she got back to camp.

"Just a few scratches," Braveheart reported.
"Shimmeringpool bit me," Springleaf complained. "I'm going to smell like grass for days."

Poolpelt stiffened when she noticed Feathershine's pale white pelt stained with blood. "Are you okay?" she gasped.
Feathershine looked at the streaks. "It's not my blood."
Relieved, Poolpelt flicked her tail across Feathershine's ears.

"They won't be back in a hurry," Blackfrost crowed.
Hawkflame was still watching the river, his eyes dark. "They shouldn't have tried it in the first place," he snarled. "They already have Icerocks."

"Come on," Icefrost meowed briskly. "Let's report back to camp."
Poolpelt followed her sister into the snowy trees.

Ears pricked, she overheard Hawkflame muttering to Icefrost.
"They'll be back," he growled. "We lost their respect when we gave up Icerocks without a fight."
"That was Silverstar's decision," Icefrost meowed evenly.
"Maybe," Hawkflame hissed, "but she should be around to back it up."
"Yes, where is Silverstar?" Icefrost meowed, as if she'd only just noticed her Clan leader hadn't taken part in the battle. "Why didn't she lead your patrol?"
Hawkflame shrugged. "You'd better ask Silverstar that, because she's been in her den all day."

Poolpelt felt the familiar unsettling tingle in her paws.
Something was wrong with Silverstar.
Something was very wrong indeed.

Chapter 24

"We drove them off," Icefrost announced to the waiting Clan as soon as the patrol filed into camp through the stone tunnel.

Briarfang padded forward. "No other DawnClan activity in the area," he reported. "We've searched throughly."
"Thank you." Icefrost dipped her head.

Poolpelt only half heard the exchange.
Her eyes were drawn to Icepaw's small, bony body lying in the center of the clearing.

Briarpool and Bladewing had smoothed her fur and arranged her paws under her, just as the Clan had done with Whiteclaw and Raindapple.

The exhilaration of the battle was instantly swallowed up by grief.
Poolpelt stood and watched numbly as Blackfrost walked stiffly over and gave Icepaw a final lick between her ears. "I'll help bury her after the vigil," he murmured to Briarpool.

Owlpaw padded from the medicine den carrying a bundle of herbs, with Flowertail following behind her.
Owlpaw placed the herbs at Flowertail's paws. "Will you chew these into a pulp while I check for wounds?" She addressed her mentor gently.
Flowertail dipped her head. "Of course, we'll definitely need lots of comfrey pulp," she glanced at the returning patrol. "It looks like there are plenty of scratches."
Flowertail bended down, and began chew at the leaves.

Owlpaw strolled briskly among the wounded.
She inspected Blackfrost first. "That's a deep scratch."
"It's nothing," Blackfrost shrugged. "I don't feel pain."

"You'll feel it if it gets infected."
She turned to Flowertail. "Did we bring tansy?"
Flowertail sniffed through the leaves and nodded.

"Go to Flowertail," Owlpaw told Blackfrost. "Ask her to rub some tansy in your wound."
When Blackfrost hesitated, Owlpaw glanced down at Icepaw's body. "You'll need it treated if you want to be able to help bury your sister."
Blackfrost dipped his head and padded over to the medicine cat.

Owlpaw checked Feathershine. "Go wash in the stream," she advised. "It smells like DawnClan blood, and licking it off will make you queasy."
"Yuck." Feathershine shuddered and hurried out of camp.

Poolpelt lifted her wretched claw as Owlpaw approached, and held it out for her to inspect.
Owlpaw wrinkled her nose. "Painful," she sympathized. "But it'll heal quickly if you rest it."
It stung like fury, but Poolpelt wanted to prove she could handle some pain.
"Get comfrey pulp from Flowertail," Owlpaw instructed. "It'll ease the pain."
"Thanks." Poolpelt limped to the medicine cat.

She wondered if she was thinking of the prophecy, measuring it against her role in the battle.
She hadn't exactly blazed like fire through the forest, but she'd done all right.

Flowertail eyed her strangely and pushed a wad of pulp toward her.
"Is that comfrey?" Poolpelt checked.
"What else would I give you for a wretched claw?"
Poolpelt smeared the ointment onto her claw.

Flowertail's eyes started glowing white for a brief moment before screeching in fear like all of ShadowClan was going to attack IceClan. "SILVERSTAR!"
Flowertail grabbed a bundle of herbs and fled past Poolpelt in a flash, heading into Silverstar's den.

Owlpaw lifted her head from Hawkflame and gasped and grabbed a bundle of herbs and joined in with Flowertail.

Feathershine came back from the stone tunnel and looked at the Clan staring in shock at the leader's den. "What's happening?"
Poolpelt couldn't understand but she did know this. "Something's wrong with Silverstar."
Springleaf gulped. "Flowertail and Owlpaw will fix her.."
Hawkflame paced. "But this is all of a sudden! How?" He then shouted to the leader's den. "Flowertail! Tell us what's wrong!"

There was shuffling noise in the leader's den and Flowertail came out, sighing. "I got Owlpaw to work while I'm out here. What is it?"
"What's wrong with Silverstar!?" Springleaf yowled in fear.

Flowertail sighed. "Silverstar is sick. She has been sick for moons, ever since Poolpelt and Feathershine became warriors. This sickness.. it muddled her mind.. made her forget things.. such as not hunting in Twolegplace."
The cats gasped in shock.
Flowertail sat down. "Her sickness got worst.. her eyes became blood-shot, and she had become bonier. But, her sickness is taking it's turn now."
She whipped her head to Hawkflame with a fierce glare. "Does that answer your question, *Hawkflame?*"
Hawkflame, for once, was speechless.
Flowertail let out a huff and padded back inside.

They waited, silently.

Thornpaw padded over to join them, staring at his paws. Was he sulking because he'd missed the battle?
No.
Thornpaw didn't sulk.
If he had something he wanted to say, he'd say it.

A shiver ran down Poolpelt's spine.
He *knew* Silverstar was sick, and didn't say anything!
Anger pulsed through her claws.
She tried to hold her anger down as hard as she could, she couldn't lash at him in front of the whole Clan.

Flowertail and Owlpaw stepped out. "Icefrost, Silverstar wants to speak with you.." Flowertail mewed.
Icefrost took a deep breath, and dipped her head, padding inside the den.
Poolpelt peaked in.

Silverstar was bonier than ever, her ribs showing out and her blood-shot eyes shoving through her eyes, she laying down on her moss.
"Icefrost.." she purred weakly.
Icefrost took a deep breath, "Silverstar.."

Silverstar let out a weak smile. "I know you'll make IceClan as it ever was, Icefrost. My last act as leader is to entrust my Clan to you, and I do with confidence."
Icefrost dipped her head. "I am honored, Silverstar. I will do my best. You have led us well."
"Thank you," Silverstar murmured.
She let out a purr. "Serve your Clan well."

She then slowly closed her eyes.
The breathing of Silverstar suddenly stopped.

Icefrost had a tear drop onto Silverstar's pelt as she dragged her out of the den by the scruff.
As she dropped Silverstar's body in the middle of the clearing, she announced, "Silverstar's dead."
Mourns of mews passed through the cats.

As the vigil had passed, the cats had stepped away from grooming Silverstar's fur.

"Icefrost is our leader now," Rainpelt observed.

Icefrost jumped onto the Highrock. "I will travel to the Moonstone tonight," she called.
In the center of the clearing, Flowertail stepped forward. "I will come with you to the Moonstone, Icefrost."
Icefrost nodded to the medicine cat. "IceClan needs a leader. And I will give them one."

Chapter 25

As the sun set on the following day, Poolpelt was on her way to find Feathershine with a shrew to share when she nearly tripped over Blackfrost, dozing beside the frozen nettle patch.
He had sat up all night with Icepaw and Silverstar's bodies, Rainpelt, Hawkflame, Briarfang, Briarpool, grieving beside him and then buried them before dawn.

"He insisted on doing it himself, with no help," Feathershine whispered to Poolpelt when she made it safely around the sleeping warrior with the shrew. "He's such a loyal warrior and brother."
"I get itttt, you're in *love.*" She teased, but couldn't help but think.
Do I act like that whenever I'm thinking of Goldenfur?

As the Clan shared tongues at the edges of the snowy clearing, Poolpelt basked in the cool evening breeze.
She didn't envy Icefrost and Flowertail's journey from the Moonstone today.
If all went well, they would be back soon, hungry and thirsty.

She was just sitting up to check whether there was some decent fresh-kill left for them when snow flopped down the side of the ravine beyond the stone tunnel.
Briarfang got to his paws and stared expectantly at the entrance to the camp.
Hawkflame gulped the last of his mouse and licked his lips.
Swiftwing sat up stiffly and pricked her ears.

Poolpelt tasted Icefrost's scent a moment before she padded into camp with Flowertail following.

Icefrost padded across the snowy clearing and mounted Highrock.
All eyes turned to the light-gray tabby she-cat, who already looked comfortable on the gray stone. "Clanmates," Icefrost began, "StarClan has approved me as leader and given me nine lives."

Cheers erupted from the Clan.
"Icestar! Icestar! Icestar!" they called to the darkening sky.
"Icestar!" Poolpelt yowled gleefully, feeling a rush of pride in her former mentor.

Icestar signaled with her tail to one of the cats below her.
"Rainpelt, I would like you to be my deputy."
The dark gray speckled she-cat dipped her head. "I would be honored, Icestar. I will serve you well and will always be loyal to my Clan above everything."

"Congratulations." Briarfang's deep mew sounded across the snowy clearing and was quickly echoed by his Clanmates.

"This is one more duty I wish to perform today as the new IceClan leader."
The Clan looked up as Icestar spoke.

"Amberpaw, step forward."
The young dark-ginger tabby she-cat padded into the center of the clearing with excitement.
Dawnstripe gazed proudly at her daughter.
Icestar purred as Amberpaw looked up at her new leader excitedly.

"I, Icestar, leader of IceClan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down at this apprentice. She has trained hard to understand the ways of your noble code, and I commend her to you as a warrior in her turn."
Icestar gazed down at Amberpaw. "Amberpaw, do you promised to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend your Clan, even at the cost of your life?"
Amberpaw dipped her head. "I do."
Icestar purred. "Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior name. Amberpaw, from this moment you will be known as Amberleaf. StarClan honors your energy and spirit, and we welcome you as a full warrior of IceClan."
"Amberleaf! Amberleaf! Amberleaf!"

Rainpelt ladded forward and pressed her muzzle between her ears.
"I'm very proud of you," she murmured.

Icestar spoke again. "IceClan has kits in the nursery, and the warriors's den is full. We face troubles, it is true. DawnClan pushes at our borders, and kittypets threaten our prey. But the Clan is well fed, and the forest is rich in prey. I vow to make IceClan as powerful as the Great Clans of old. Today's IceClan will be remembered alongside ShadowClan and ThunderClan. Our warriors are courageous and loyal and skilled in battle. There is no reason to feel besieged by our enemies. We have defeated them before and we will do so again. Let me carry you forward to a new era in which IceClan is so respected and feared that no cat will dare set paw on our lands."

When will she take back Icerocks?
Poolpelt pressed her claws into the snow.

Tails swished and paws kneaded the snow. "Icestar! Icestar!" The cheer rose again from the excited Clan.
Icestar lifted her chin, her pelt gleaming in the moonlight, and let her Clan cheer until the snowy trees began to tremble with noise.

Poolpelt longed to be standing in her paw steps.
She had lifted the Clan from anxiety to hope.
Imagine being up there, looking down at her Clanmates—the power she must feel.
Her mouth felt with dry with sudden, raw hunger.

Beside her, Blackfrost leaned closer to Feathershine and whispered in her ear.
Prickling her ears, Poolpelt strained to hear.
"I'm going to be up there one day," hissed the young warrior, "addressing the Clan."
As Feathershine purred encouragingly, Poolpelt couldn't help but feel a prickle of jealousy.
Not if I get there first!

"Braveheart!"
Rainpelt was organizing the patrols.
Dawn had not yet broken, and camp glowed in the half-light.
"Take Dawnstripe, Springleaf, Snowheart, and Poolpelt to patrol the DawnClan border. Hawkflame, Briarpool, and Blackfrost, patrol

SmokeClan's boundary."
Hawkflame nodded and led his patrol toward the stone tunnel.

Braveheart leaned toward Poolpelt, (which made her heart started beating for a bit), his whiskers twitching. "I hope Feathershine can manage without Blackfrost for a few heartbeats," he said.
Poolpelt purred playfully. "I doubt she can stand a *second* without him."

Braveheart led the patrol to the DawnClan border.
She didn't know why her heart has been starting beat over Braveheart like it did over Goldenfur..
She can't be.. *in love* with Braveheart too?
How could she have feelings for two toms?

"No scents." Braveheart stood at the border, tasting the air. "We'll re-mark the border and head back."

Red-spotted snow and scuffed flecks of blood were all that betrayed the battle that had taken place there not too long ago.
"Do you think they'll try it again?" Dawnstripe ventured.

Braveheart shook his head. "I think they learned their lesson, the mangy furballs. And once Icestar takes back Icerocks, the border will be easier to patrol."
"Do you think she will?" Poolpelt asked.
"I hope so," Braveheart replied. "Or we'll never regain the respect of the Clans."

She was gazing through the snowy trees at the smooth rocks, pink in the dawn light.
They were no bare—no sign of DawnClan warriors, even in the shadows.

Poolpelt searched the far bank.
No cat there, either.
What had she expected?
To see Goldenfur relaxing himself.

She could imagine Goldenfur in his Clan, being a loyal and noble warrior to DawnClan.

Stop that! She told herself. *Why should you be thinking of a DAWNCLAN cat?*
Maybe because I'm in love with him.. She shot back to her mind.
Aaaannddd I'm arguing with myself.

"Poolpelt?" Braveheart's mew startled her out of her thoughts. "Are you coming?"
The rest of the patrol was already heading away through the snowy trees.
Braveheart had stopped and looking back at her.
Poolpelt purred, flattered by the fact he had waited for her.
"Yes!" Poolpelt hurried after them.

Her belly was rumbling by the time they reached the camp.
The fresh-kill pile was still stocked from yesterday's hunting, and she was looking forward to a juicy shrew.

"Poolpelt!" Feathershine called to her.
The pale white warrior was hurrying across the snowy clearing toward her, the morning sun dazzling off her freshly groomed pelt.
Poolpelt sighed. "Is it urgent? I was just going to eat."

"Come hunting with me," Feathershine begged. "If you've already been on patrol, you can eat while we're out."
Her eyes were round and hopeful, and Poolpelt couldn't refuse, despite her growling belly.

She followed her sister out of camp, and by the time they'd reached the top of the ravine, she was looking forward to hunting.
Frozen leaves swished in the cold breeze, and the forest rustled with prey.

"Where should we hunt?" She asked Feathershine.
Feathershine shrugged.
"I thought you *wanted* to hunt."
"I guess."
Poolpelt rolled her eyes.

She pushed on into the snowy forest, determined to bring Feathershine back into the real world. "Are you happy that Icestar is our leader now?"

"Of course," Feathershine answered.
"But it feels like everything's changed," Poolpelt murmured.
She ducked under a frozen bramble and held it back with her tail while Feathershine joined her. "Silverstar and Icepaw are dead. Icepaw was younger than us!"

Feathershine paused to nose a pale blue flower slipping out of the snow. "But there's always new life," she mewed softly.
Poolpelt blinked. "What do you mean?"
Her sister lowered her muzzle and looked at her. The blue flower nodded as if it were listening. "I'm expecting kits."

Happiness surged inside Poolpelt.
"*Really!?*" She gasped. "I'm going to be an aunt?!"
Feathershine nodded. "Blackfrost's overjoyed," she purred. "He says the Clan needs new warriors. There is only Thornpaw in the apprentices's den."
"He'll make a good father," Poolpelt purred, trying hard to contain the happiness in her voice.

She glanced up at the sky.
Thank you, StarClan!

Chapter 26

[image] [image] [image] [image]

"Quick! Get Flowertail and Owlpaw!" Poolpelt gasped.

On the other side of the nursery, Ashfall sleepily lifted her head. "Are the kits coming?"
"What else would it be?" Blackfrost snapped.
The warrior had stopped by the nursery to visit his mate when Feathershine's pains had suddenly begun.
Ashfall heaved herself to her paws. "I'll get them," she offered.
She padded out of the den, puffing.
A half-moon from kitting, the energetic warrior had become as cumbersome as a badger.

Blackfrost plucked nervously at the edge of Feathershine's nest as his mate writhed in the moss.
Poolpelt licked Feathershine between the ears. "It'll be over soon," she promised.

She tried not to think of Duskwing's long kitting.
Or the death of her she-kits before they'd reached one moon.
At least Shadowkit's strong and healthy, Poolpelt reminded herself.

He was scrabbling out of Duskwing's nest now, stretching up to see what was happening.
Duskwing tugged him back by the tail. "You're as nosy as a squirrel," she scolded gently. "Why don't you go outside and see if you can find Thornpaw?"
"Okay!" Shadowkit chirped. He squirmed out of the nursery just as Flowertail pushed her way in.

"Watch out! Coming through!" Shadowkit yowled as he scooted straight under the medicine cat's belly.
"That kit gets bossier by the day," Flowertail murmured, dropping a bundle of leaves by Feathershine's nest. "I know he's the only kit in

the Clan, but he's starting to act like a little leader."
Poolpelt flicked her tail. "Feathershine's kits will give them someone else to fuss over."
She felt almost *glad* that there would be more kits other than Shadowkit. He always seemed too arrogant and disrespectful for a kit.

Flowertail huffed. "Sorry, Owlpaw's is out herb-gathering."

"How are you doing, little one?" Flowertail bent down to sniff the pale white queen's head.
"I'm thirsty," Feathershine whimpered. "Can I have some wet moss?"
"Good idea," Flowertail mewed. "Blackfrost, please could you get some?"

Blackfrost stopped shredding the moss at the edge of the nest and looked at his mate. "Are you sure you'll be okay?"
"We'll take care of her," Flowertail promised.

As soon as he was gone, Feathershine sighed. "Thanks for getting rid of him before he pulled my nest to pieces."
Poolpelt's whiskers twitched amusingly. It looked like her sister hadn't lost her sense of humor yet.

Then Feathershine gasped, and her eyes stretched.
Flowertail pressed her paw on her belly. "Pain?"
Feathershine nodded, holding her breath.
"Try breathing more, not less," Flowertail suggested.

Poolpelt didn't think she could watch her sister being in agony. "Can you give her poppy seeds for the pain?"
Flowertail shook her head. "She needs to be able to feel it, so we know when the kits are coming."

Feathershine breathed out slowly. "Will it be long?" she croaked.
"A while yet."

"Wait there." Poolpelt padded out of the nursery.

Ashfall had settled on the soft snow outside. "I thought I'd give you some peace," she meowed as Poolpelt trotted past.

"Thanks," Poolpelt called over her shoulder.

She scanned the edge of the camp, looking for something.
The faint scent of leaf-fall tainted the breeze.
Poolpelt quickly saw what she was after: a short, stumpy stick, not too splintery, but tough.
She picked it up in her jaws and hurried back to the nursery.

"What's that?" Duskwing was peering out of her nest.
"I thought Feathershine could bite down on it when the pain came."
Poolpelt pushed the stick under Feathershine's muzzle.
Duskwing shuddered, clearly remembering her own ordeal. "I wish I'd had one of those."

"Thank you," Feathershine panted. Her belly quivered and she grabbed the stick between her teeth.

The stone scraped as Blackfrost padded through the entrance and dropped the moss he was carrying. "Is she all right?"
"She's fine," Flowertail reported. "But she'll need more moss. Gather it from the stream outside camp. The water will be fresher there."
Blackfrost nodded, turned tail, and left.
"Thanks," Feathershine murmured to Flowertail.

Poolpelt was aware of the sun moving slowly overhead, sending shifting shafts of light into the nursery.
Feathershine was getting more and more tired, and she kept closing her eyes for long stretches.

"It can't be long now, can it?" Poolpelt whispered to Flowertail.
"Not long." She had just given Feathershine a mouthful of leaves to chew on.
Poolpelt recognized the shape from when Duskwing was kitting: raspberry.
She hoped they'd be more effective this time.

Feathershine groaned as another spasm shook her.
"Here!" Poolpelt pushed the stick toward her muzzle.
"No!" Feathershine shrieked, pushing it away.

"The first one's coming," Flowertail meowed from where she

crouched by Feathershine's haunches.

Feathershine trembled as a small, pale white, tabby she-kit slid out into the nest.

Flowertail bent down and lapped at the she-kit, her mouth opening to show her tiny, tongue.

Feathershine turned and sniffed at the she-kit. "She's beautiful," she gasped.
She grabbed her scruff and hauled her to her belly.
The she-kit began suckling at once, kneading Feathershine with fierce paws.
"She's a strong one," Flowertail purred.

Poolpelt felt a flood of relief. "How many more?" she asked.
Flowertail pressed Feathershine's flank. "That's it."
Duskwing sat up. "Only one?"
"A tough little she-cat," Flowertail told her. "You can't ask more than that."

Flowertail then murmured, "Kinda sounds like someone else I know,"
"Hey!" Poolpelt said, unsure whether to take it as a compliment or a teasing.

Shadowkit scrabbled into the den. "Is it over?" he squeaked, peeking into the nest.
He blinked at the pale white she-kit. "Where are the other kits?"
"That's the only one," Duskwing told him.
Shadowkit cocked his head. "That's all?" he meowed. "But it's pale white. It'll never be able to hunt with a pelt that color. The prey'll see her coming tree-lengths away."
Duskwing climbed out of her nest and nosed Shadowkit away.
"She'll be a fine hunter, just like her mother," she told him.

Blackfrost appeared in the entrance again, this time his jaws stretched with the biggest wad of dripping moss Poolpelt had ever seen.
"You'll drown the nursery with that," she teased.

Blackfrost's gaze reached his daughter.
He flung the moss aside and crossed the nursery in one leap. "She's beautiful!"
He licked Feathershine between the ears. "Well done," he murmured. "I'm so proud of you."

"What should we call her?" Feathershine asked.
Blackfrost looked thoughtful. "How about... Featherkit? After their amazing mother?" He licked Feathershine's cheek.
Feathershine purred. "Featherkit it is."

Blackfrost leaned forward and licked Featherkit.
The kit mewed in protest, then went back to suckling.
Blackfrost stared down at his daughter, his eyes brimming with emotion.

Blackfrost straightened up. "I'll go get you the tastiest of prey I can find," he promised Feathershine.
Flowertail shook her head. "She won't eat for a while," she warned. "But that moss will be useful."
She plucked a piece and placed it where Feathershine could lap at it.
She did so, thirsty, her eyes half-closed with exhaustion.

"Will she be all right?" Poolpelt whispered.
"She just needs rest," Flowertail promised. "She'll be fine."

Relieved, Poolpelt sat back and watched Featherkit suckle, amazed that she knew what to do already.

Welcome to IceClan, little one. May StarClan light your path, always.

"Look!" Feathershine's soft mew woke Poolpelt the next morning. "She's opened her eyes already!"
"Great!" Shadowkit's head shot up over the edge of Duskwing's nest. "Can I take her out to explore?"

Feathershine looked as if Shadowkit had suggested taking her daughter out to play in a fox burrow.
Shaking her head, she wrapped her tail protectively around

Featherkit.
"I woke you up every day to go out and you didn't have a problem with it," Poolpelt purred, remembering their days as kits in the nursery.

Featherkit gazed around the den, her blue eyes but her ears pricked. Her tiny paws kneaded the bedding, and her tail stuck straight out.

Feathershine sighed. "If she wants to go out, then she can." She wrapped her tail tighter and glared at Shadowkit. "But *no farther* than the clearing."
"I'll keep an eye on them," Poolpelt promised. "You just rest."
Feathershine still looked exhausted, hardly able to do more than lap at the moss Blackfrost kept bringing. "Thank you," she breathed.

Shadowkit was already out of his nest and balancing on the edge of Feathershine's. "Come on!" he called to Featherkit. "There's loads to see."
Featherkit turned slowly and focussed on her little denmate.
"We're going to be warriors," Shadowkit told her. "We might as well start now."
Featherkit blinked away the fuzziness in her gaze. "Okay," she mewed.
She scrambled up the side of the nest and teetered beside Shadowkit.
"This way," Shadowkit led her to the entrance.
Featherkit followed on unsteady legs.

"Don't take your eyes off her for an instant," Feathershine called as Poolpelt followed the two kits from the den.
"I won't," Poolpelt replied over her shoulder.

Featherkit looked even smaller outside the nursery.
The clearing that stretched away ahead of her might as well have been the valley to Highstones.

Poolpelt felt the sharp memory of her first time out, how big everything seemed, especially the warriors.

Darkcloud padded past. "Is that our new warrior?" he meowed.
Poolpelt nodded.

A purr rumbled in Darkcloud's throat. "Well, show her the warriors's den and tell her to stay out. She'll get there soon enough.
Amusement lit his eyes. Was he recalling the time she had nearly wandered into the warriors's den?
She nodded, whiskers twitching. "I will."

She didn't want Featherkit to grow up for a long time yet.
Let her play peacefully and chase nothing fiercer than a ball of moss for as many moons as she can.

A half-moon later, Splashkit, Riverkit and Robinkit were born.

Splashkit was a dark brown she-kit with a white stomach and both darker and white dapples with blue eyes.

[OC belongs to ArenaTyke]

While Riverkit was a black, ear-tufted she-kit with pale blue eyes.

And their sister, Robinkit, was a dappled, tortoiseshell with orange eyes.

Ashfall sat up proudly in her nest when Poolpelt came in to visit them.
These were her first kits, but they had been born as easily as a beechnut slipping out of its shell.

"The nursery hasn't been this full since we were kits," Feathershine observed.
"It's *too* busy," Shadowkit complained. "There's no room for proper games now."

"Why don't you go out and play?" Duskwing suggested. "You could show Splashkit, Riverkit and Robinkit the camp."
Ashfall's kits started to bounce with excitement at the prospect of seeing their new home.

"I'll help!" Featherkit squeaked, trying to beat Shadowkit to the entrance.
Feathershine's daughter had grown well, but she was still no match

for her older denmate, in either breadth of shoulder or stubbornness.
Shadowkit pushed easily ahead of her and led all four kits out of the nursery.

Ashfall sighed. "Will they be okay? I don't want them to pester the older cats."
"Do you want me to watch them?" Poolpelt asked.
"That would be great, thanks." Ashfall settled down in her nest.

Duskwing stood up, stretching each leg in turn. "I'll come, too, and get prey from the pile."
The hazel tabby queen was finally looking fit and strong again.
She padded from her nest and followed Poolpelt from the nursery.

The five kits were already hurtling across the snowy clearing.

"Not so fast!" Poolpelt called. "Don't forget, it's Splashkit's, Riverkit's, and Robinkit's first time out!"
"Kits always grow faster when they've got denmates to keep up with," Duskwing commented as the kits disappeared into the hole that led to the medicine cat's den.
"I'd better see what they're getting up to," Poolpelt meowed. She didn't want them getting into Flowertail's supplies.
Leaving Duskwing to take her pick from the fresh-kill pile, she hurried across the snowy clearing to the medicine den.

So much has changed in the last few moons, and all for the better.
It seemed as if the shadow that had rested over the Clan had been lifted.
Silverstar's passing had shocked all the Clans, but Icestar had been resolute at the next Gathering.
Icestar made it clear that Silverstar's passing signaled a new, stronger IceClan.
Now IceClan faced the coming leaf-fall well fed, with a nursery bustling with healthy kits and warriors confident in their new leader's power.
Poolpelt felt warm with satisfaction as she padded into the medicine cat den.

"Get away, you vermin!"

A vicious yowl echoing from the den set her fur on end.

When she came in, she bit back a gasp.

The kits were crouched, trembling, on the ground while Flowertail glared at them, hissing as though faced with a horde of SmokeClan warriors.

Poolpelt shot between her and the kits. "What are you doing?" She gasped.
Flowertail didn't seem to notice her.

Wild-eyed and bristling, she twitched her tail towards Shadowkit.
"Get that creature out of my den!" she snarled.
Shadowkit glared at the medicine cat.
"Get him out!" Flowertail repeated.

Poolpelt swept the kits back toward the entrance of the medicine cat den, without taking her eyes off Flowertail. "Off you go, little ones," she called, trying to sound cheerful.

"What's the matter?" Owlpaw hurried into the clearing, dropping the bile-soaked moss she'd been carrying.
"It's Flowertail!" Poolpelt meowed, letting out her surprise. "She's scaring the kits."
Owlpaw took a step closer to her mentor, brushing her fur against Owlpaw's.
"Sorry," she apologized to Poolpelt. "She's been having nightmares. They must have woken her while she was in the middle of a bad one."

"Nightmares?" Flowertail growled. "Only when I open my eyes and see *that!*" She bared her teeth at Shadowkit.

The kits had made it to the edge of the medicine cat den, staring back in confusion.
Poolpelt turned and shooed them away.

"What did we do wrong?" Splashkit was bristling with terror.
"Nothing," Poolpelt promised. "Flowertail just having an outburst and imagining things."

"I'm not imagining *that!*" spat the medicine cat from behind them. Poolpelt glanced back to see Flowertail pointing a hooked claw at Shadowkit.

Flowertail's ears flattened against her head.
"Keep that creature away from me!"

Chapter 27

Newly fallen leaves littered the snowy forest floor, crunching beneath Poolpelt's black paws and giving up their musty scent. Birds chattered in the snow-filled branches, and squirrels were busy collecting for their leaf-bare store.

Poolpelt had no interest in prey.
The fresh-kill was full, the borders secure.
After the clamor of the nursery, she'd wanted only the peace of the forest.

She'd noticed Feathershine sighing after her as she'd left the tumbling chaos of the stone den.
However much she loved Featherkit, Feathershine missed being a warrior.

"How come Blackfrost gets to hunt and patrol?" she had asked Poolpelt the previous day. "It's *his* kit, too."
"He can't give Featherkit milk," Poolpelt had reminded her. She'd nudged her sister gently. "Featherkit'll be eating mouse soon, and then you'll be able to leave her with Ashfall or Duskwing for a while and join a hunting patrol."
Feathershine had sighed. "Yes, but then I'd miss the little furball."
Poolpelt had swallowed a flash of frustration. *Pick a side!*

"Well done, Thornpaw!" Braveheart's mew sounded from over a rise, snapping Poolpelt's thoughts back to the forest.

A branch shook overhead.
"Look, Poolpelt!" Thornpaw was peering down from the leaves. "I'm going to climb to the top!"
"Be careful," Poolpelt warned.
Thornpaw seemed more adventurous with each passing day.
Thornpaw's adventerous spirit was what got Poolpelt to forgive Thornpaw for not telling his Clanmates about Silverstar's condition.

"Concentrate on what you're doing!" Braveheart yowled from the bottom of the trunk.
"Where's Rainpelt?" Poolpelt asked.
Since Ashfall was with kits, Rainpelt had become Thornpaw's new mentor.

Braveheart didn't take his eyes off the golden-brown tabby shape scrabbling through the leaves. "She had to see Flowertail about a seed that got stuck in her eye."

"I'm going to ask Icestar if Braveheart can be my mentor *forever!*" came a squeal above them. "Rainpelt would never have let me climb this high!"

Poolpelt raised an eyebrow at Braveheart.

Braveheart flashed Poolpelt a guilty look. "Opps," he meowed. "Thornpaw seemed so sure he could do it, I assumed it wasn't the first time..."
Dear StarClan, he's a dork!
Poolpelt purred. "Don't worry! I won't tell Rainpelt."
Braveheart flicked his tail lightly across her flank. "Thanks! And I'll make sure Thornpaw gets back to the camp in one piece!"
Poolpelt laughed. "We'll see.."

Heading away from Thornpaw's tree, Poolpelt wandered through the snow and pushed her way past a frozen wall of ferns.
She was thirsty, and the river was burbling nearby.

The river had risen since the height of greenleaf, splashing over stones and lapping at the snow, its chatter harmonizing with the soft rustle of the snowy forest.

Poolpelt peered through a snowy bush and down the leaf-snowed bank.
A golden tabby pelt moved in the shallows.
Huh?

She tasted the air warily.
Stiffening, she recognized the scent of DawnClan.

She stared in astonishment as Goldenfur padded out on the IceClan side of the river, barely three tail- lengths from Poolpelt.
He shook himself like a dog, then stretched out on a smooth stone sloping up from the water.
The sun glistened on his thick-furred pelt.

He was going to sleep! On IceClan territory!

Poolpelt tensed, ready to spring out and confront the trespasser.
Then she paused.
He looked so peaceful.
Caught in the moment, she caught herself watching his flank rising and falling.
What am I doing!?
She shook her head annoyingly, forcing out the blushing on her face.

She plunged through the snowy bushes and skidded to a halt behind him, sending small stones rattling down the water. "You!"
Goldenfur lifted his head and glanced over his shoulder and smiled happily. "Poolpelt!"
Poolpelt forced herself and her heart and glared at Goldenfur even through his smile.
"Just because you took Icerocks," she hissed, "doesn't mean you can help yourself to any piece of territory you want."

"Sorry." Goldenfur got to his paws. "I couldn't resist such a sunny spot."
"You couldn't resist?" She growled.

All her hesitance to attack him vanished.
She launched herself at him, but Goldenfur ducked and she missed.
Poolpelt stopped with her black paws dug into the stones to stop her from falling over.

She twisted and sharply nipped his hind leg.
"Ow!" Goldenfur hopped out of the way and swung his head toward her, catching her shoulder as she reared for another lunge.

While she was scrabbling at the air, Poolpelt's hind black paws skidded out of the stones.

She lost her balance and flopped ungracefully into the river.
As the water drenched her pelt, panic shot through her.
I'm drowning!
"Help me!"

But Goldenfur stayed on the bank, his eyes bright with amusement.
"Try standing up," he suggested calmly.

Poolpelt thrust her black paws downward, expecting to vanish underwater.
Instead, her feet stubbed against the round stones on the bottom of the river.
She stood up, surprised to find the water barely lapping at her belly fur.
Hot with embarrassment, she stalked onto the snowy bank and shook herself.

"How was I supposed to know it was that shallow?" she snorted.
"IceClan cats don't get in the water."
Goldenfur shrugged. "Sorry you got a bit damp." His gaze flitted over her pelt. "I was just defending myself."

Poolpelt snorted. "Why don't you just be quiet and move away from my territory?"
He tipped his head to one side. "It seems a shade to leave at the start of a *beautiful* friendship."

Poolpelt rolled her eyes. "Surrrrrrreee. You'd better leave. Now or I'll hecking give you a scar you won't forget."
Goldenfur laughed and then dipped his head, his gaze holding hers for an instant, then padded into the shallows and swam sleekly across the river.
Poolpelt watched him slip onto the bank at the other side, water dripping from his thick pelt.

Before he disappeared into the trees he looked back at her, his eyes gleaming.
"I won't forget you, scar or no scar," he called.

Poolpelt did her best to dig her a hole and dump all her feelings into the hole.

She snapped away from him before he could even see a *hint* of her blushing.
Dumb, stupid, handsome, sweet, frost-brain!

She stamped up the snowy bank and headed into the snowy trees.

When she reached the top of the ravine, she was thinking over Goldenfur.
How could Goldenfur be so nice and sweet to her when she was an enemy warrior?
Why does my heart beat whenever I talk to him?

She was so lost in thought, Amberleaf made her jump when she bounded over the top of the cliff.
"You're wet!" Amberleaf glanced at the sky, puzzled. "It hasn't been raining, has it?"
Poolpelt glanced at her black paws. "It was...er...I slipped and fell...the bank was..." How could she possibly say that she had basically went for a swim in the DawnClan border?
Amberleaf's whiskers twitched. "Not looking where you going?"
"It was slippery!"

Amberleaf's eyes flashed with curiosity. "You look different."
Poolpelt shifted her black paws. "How?"
"You look moony. Like Feathershine when she's talking about Blackfrost."
"Don't be silly!"
"Who is it?" Amberleaf's ears were twitching.
"No one!"

"Braveheart?" Amberleaf guessed.
Poolpelt halted.
Amberleaf was *half* right, she *did* love Braveheart, but not as much as Goldenfur.
But.. who does my heart really belong to?

"Of course not!" She replied.
Amberleaf tipped her head to one side. "Too bad," she meowed. "He spends enough time mooning over you."
"R-really..?" She felt like she has been blushing too much for the whole day, she should probably make a blush count.

Amberleaf rolled her eyes. "Hadn't you notice him watching you?"
"NO!" Poolpelt said with so much ferocity to make Amberleaf stop butting into her love life, which worked, since Amberleaf took a step back.

"Okay." The dark-ginger tabby warrior changed the subject. "I'm just off to get some fresh moss for Feathershine and Featherkit."
At the mention of her niece, Poolpelt softened, her damp pelt smoothing. "How is Featherkit?"
"She's been chasing Feathershine's tail all morning. She's ready to box her ears, but she won't. She does it sweetly."
"I can imagine." Poolpelt pictured Featherkit's blue eyes gazing up innocently up while she batted her mother's fluffy tail.

"I just hope Shadowkit isn't a bad influence," Amberleaf fretted. "When I left, he was trying to persuade Featherkit to flick burrs into Splashkit's pelt while she was sleeping."
Poolpelt gasped. "Didn't Duskwing stop them?!"
"You know Duskwing." Amberleaf sighed. "She thinks Shadowkit can do no wrong."
Duskwing spoils him.. she thought angrily.

"I'll visit the nursery," Poolpelt offered.
"Feathershine would appreciate it," Amberleaf meowed. "I think she's got den fever. She's almost shredded her nest. She needs some fresh air."

As Amberleaf padded into the snowy trees, Poolpelt noticed a tuft of dog hair caught in the snow.
There was barely any scent clinging to it—it must have blown there, rather than left by a passing dog—but it might keep Featherkit busy for a while.
She plucked it up with her claws and carried it down to the nursery.

Feathershine was looking hot and harassed when Poolpelt padded into the stone den.
Splashkit, Riverkit and Robinkit were tumbling over Ashfall, their tails flicking in Feathershine's face at every turn.
Featherkit was fast asleep, splayed on Feathershine's flank so that she couldn't move.

Shadowkit was nagging his mother.
"Why can't I go out?"
"You've just come in."
"But it's a sunny day."
"You need a nap."
"I'm not tired."
"You will be later."
"I'll sleep then."
"But you'll be grumpy all afternoon if you don't nap now."
"No, I won't."
"Yes, you will."
Feathershine rolled her eyes at Poolpelt.

"Here." Poolpelt dropped the tuft at the edge of her sister's nest. Amberleaf was right. The moss was in shreds.
"Featherkit can play with it when she wakes."
Feathershine groaned, trying to adjust her position without disturbing the kit.

"What's that?" Shadowkit was already leaping for the dog fur.
"It's for Feather—!"
Shadowkit hooked it up before Poolpelt could finish her sentence and started chasing it around the nursery. "Look!" he squealed. "I'm Blackfrost, attacking that mangy dog!"
"Keep your voice down," Feathershine pleaded.

Shadowkit paused, his claws pinning the dog fur to the den floor. "I hate the nursery," he complained. "It's too full of kits. I'm never allowed to play anymore. I should be in the apprentices's den with Thornpaw. I bet *he* doesn't have to take afternoon naps."
Poolpelt purred. "Maybe not, but he wishes he could."

Featherkit lifted her head sleepily. "What's going on?"
"You've woken her up!" Feathershine puffed.
"Good," Shadowkit mewed. "Now she can play, too."
Arrogant furball! Poolpelt thought angrily.

Featherkit looked around. "Play what?"
"My new game; it's called Kill the Dog," Shadowkit told him.
He flung the tuft of fur over Featherkit's head.
Featherkit scrabbled up to catch it, making Feathershine grunt as

the kit's hind claws dug into her pelt.

"Let's go for a walk," Poolpelt suggested.
Feathershine blinked.
"Featherkit's happy playing with Shadowkit," Poolpelt reasoned. "I'm sure she could spare you for a while."

She looked at the pale white kit bundling around the nests after Shadowkit. "You'll be okay if Feathershine comes for a walk with me, won't you?"
Featherkit didn't even glance at her. "Of course."

"We'll keep an eye on her," Ashfall promised.
Feathershine's eyes brightened. "Well, I suppose I could go out for a while."

"It'll do you good," Poolpelt promised.
"Are you sure she'll be okay?" Feathershine fretted.

"She'll be fine," Ashfall told her. "Now, go on. I'm sick of listening to you sigh."
"I don't sigh!" Feathershine objected.
Duskwing flicked her tail. "You've been snorting like a badger all morning!"
"Okay, okay!" Reluctantly Feathershine climbed out of her nest.
"Don't come back till your paws ache!" Ashfall called as Feathershine followed Poolpelt out of the nursery.

"Hurry up!"
Feathershine was dragging her paws as Poolpelt led her to the entrance. "But what if she gets hungry?"
"She won't starve."
"What if she gets anxious without me?"
"She's got a whole Clan looking out for her." Poolpelt nudged her sister into the stone tunnel. "I think she'll be okay."
Great StarClan, if this is like what it is to have kits, then I'm glad I don't have any!

She shooed Feathershine up the ravine, shaking her head when Feathershine halted at the top and peered wistfully down at the camp.

"Look," Poolpelt huffed. "It's a lovely day. Featherkit will be fine. It's not like we're going to Highstones. You'll see her again before the sun's moved a mouse-length."

Chapter 28

[image]

Poolpelt led her sister through the snowy trees, followed by the route she'd taken that morning.

It'll be quiet by the river, she told herself, *out of the way of hunting patrols.*
The sound of the water would sooth Feathershine.
And it would be sunny, so they could bask for a while.

Feathershine already looked happier, trotting through the breeze-rustled snowy forest. "I'd forgotten how good it smells," she chirped, taking another deep breath.
Suddenly she stopped. "Wait."
Poolpelt stopped, trying not to sigh. "What is it now?"

With a playful hiss, Feathershine lunged at her, giving her a shove that sent her tumbling against a frozen bramble heavy with blackberries. The fruit trembled as Poolpelt found her black paws. "Why, you—!" She sprang out of the sweet-smelling thorns, bowling her sister to the ground, where they tussled like kits.

Feathershine pinned Poolpelt down. "Do you give in?"
"Never!" Poolpelt yowled.
She pushed with her hind black paws and rolled Feathershine off.

Feathershine landed softly with her paws and giggled. "We haven't done this since we were kits!"
Poolpelt purred, thinking of their fond memories together in the nursery.

Feathershine purred, sprinting off. "Race you!" She disappeared into the frozen undergrowth.
"You're on!" Poolpelt hurried after her sister, following her scent trail through the frozen undergrowth.

As the snow started disappearing under their paws, and snowy trees started turning into pine, she pushed through a clump of ferns, still fresh with Feathershine's scent.

"Feathershine?"
The pale white warrior was grooming herself behind a pine root, then looking up and grinning at Poolpelt. "Glad you catched up!"
Poolpelt purred. "You're too fast!"
Feathershine nodded.

Poolpelt thought for a moment as they looked at the sky.
She felt like Feathershine needed to hear this.

Poolpelt looked at Feathershine. "Feathershine, I'd just want you to know.. I'm glad your my sister. We may take different paths in our lives, but.. you'll always be my sister. If you're in any danger, I would always go there to save you. We've been sisters for the longest time and I'm glad. I'll always protect you until the day we die."
Feathershine's eyes brightened.
Poolpelt purred and put her black paw over Feathershine. "Enough of all this sappiness, you're my sister and I love you!"
Feathershine laughed. "I love you too, Poolpelt!"

Feathershine's ears then flicked and crouched, fur twitching along her spine, her jaws open to taste the air.
"Get down," Feathershine hissed, "I smell rouges!"
Great. Rouges just came in time to ruin the moment. Poolpelt thought irritated.

Poolpelt ducked beside her.
Sure enough, the scent of rouges was fresh on the breeze.

Poolpelt wrinkled her nose. More than one cat tainted the air.
"Should I get a patrol?" she whispered.
"There are no more than three of them," Feathershine murmured. "We can take them ourselves."
Feathershine crept forward over the tree root and slithered under a bush.
Poolpelt slid in beside her.

Now she could clearly hear rouge voices muttering a few tail-lengths ahead.
"You should have never chased it over the road."
"But I nearly had it!"
"It's gone now."

Poolpelt peered through the leaves and saw three pelts huddled in a small clearing between the pines.
"Let's go back." A black tom spoke.
"No!" A tortoiseshell tom insisted. "I can still smell the squirrel. It's close."
The black rouge flicked his tail. "Don't you know? We're in forest cat territory, meaning we could be clawed out easily if we get caught!"
"I'm not worried about those forest cats," meowed a thick, glossy, and soft-furred brown she-cat with eyes the color of the sun.

"They'll be busy grooming themselves. We'll just get the squirrel and take it back over the road. They'll never know we were here."
"Mouse, just because you're not scared of forest cats, doesn't mean we are!" The black tom's eyes widened in fear.
The brown she-cat sighed. "Okay," she conceded. "Let's go."

The tortoiseshell stiffened. "No! I can smell the squirrel."
Paws skittered nearby.
The rouges pressed themselves to the ground.
"This way!" The tortoiseshell began to stalk, keeping low.

Feathershine growled, "If they think they're going to hunt on Clan territory, they've got another thing coming."

Feathershine leaped out from the bush and skidded in front of the rouges, her back arched and her claws unsheathed. "Stop right there!"
The rouges flinched away, tails brushing.
Poolpelt pelted after her sister. "Mangy crow-food eaters!" She bared her teeth, a growl rumbling in her throat.

The tortoiseshell blinked. "Is that it? Two cats? Not as scary as the stories."
"Scary enough to deal with you!" Poolpelt spat.

The black tom straightened, eyes gleaming. "You think so?"
Mouse snarled. "If you're from the stories, then I think we'll catch this squirrel and *then* go home."

"Oh no, you don't!" Feathershine launched herself at Mouse, knocking her sideways with a crashing blow from her forepaw.
The tortiseshell's eyes widened in shock.
Even Poolpelt was startled. "Feathershine...," she began.
"I've been stuck in camp too long to miss the chance for a fight," Feathershine spat.

There was no way Poolpelt was going to let her sister battle these trespassers alone.

The tortoiseshell tom was the first to run, screeching and running cowardly.
Springing forward, she lashed out with unsheathed claws at the black tom, slitting his nose.

She heard yowls from Feathershine.
"You don't escape that easily!"

She hoped Feathershine was doing fine with Mouse.

The black tom scrabbled to his paws. "Let's get out of here!" he yowled.
She then heard Mouse yowl. "Cowards! I'll finish this myself!"

Poolpelt snapped her head around to have her eyes widen in horror.

Feathershine's blood splurting out as Mouse slashes through her throat.

Chapter 29

Poolpelt felt ice pierce her heart as Feathershine slumped to the ground, blood spreading through the grass.

Mouse took a step back, her paw covered in blood and looking down at Featherfall in horror. "I...I didn't mean to.."

Rage and fury pulsed through Poolpelt as she launched herself at Mouse, pinning her to the ground with her sharp, unsheathed claws.
"YOU!!"
Mouse looked in horror. "I-I-I didn't mean to! I swear!"
Poolpelt snarled. "Too bad."
She raised her sharp claws, ready for the kill.

Wait...
Why does this... seem so familiar.

Memories flashed in Poolpelt's mind.

Lightning cracking...

"FIGHT, YOU COWARD!"

"You don't know what I want!"

"You were always a fool, Sunpaw. Thinking I would merely attack you. No, I'm here to kill you."

"Well that sucks, I was starting to like you."

"I don't see why this is necessary, I don't want to hurt you."

"I DO! YOU KILLED THEM!"

"Say hello to StarClan for me."

She shook her head.
She was doing it again.. it was happening all over again.
I'm turning into Darkfrost..
She was having too much hate and anger in her..
I don't want to be that cat ever again..
Maybe.. Revenge should never be the answer.. but.. forgiveness.

She then lowered her paw and leaped off of Mouse, giving Mouse the chance to run away, speeding off as fast as a rabbit.

She then whipped her head towards Feathershine.
"Feathershine?" She bent down and nudged her sister with her black paw.
The pale white warrior didn't respond, just lay limply on the grass as blood leaked from her throat more.
"Come on," Poolpelt urged. "We have to get back to camp. We've got to report those rouges."

A thin trail of blood rolled from Feathershine's mouth.

"I'll help you," Poolpelt offered.
She grasped Feathershine's scruff and began to drag her into the forest.
"Try your paws," Poolpelt begged through her mouthful of fur.
"Once you're walking, you'll feel better."
Feathershine's body slid over as they started entering back into the familiar IceClan snowy environment.

Oh, StarClan. We'd should of never found those rouges.
They'd be home by now, Featherkit bouncing with excitement at seeing her mother back.

"Poolpelt?" Briarfang's mew sounded through the snowy trees.
Poolpelt let go of her sister and stared at the brown tom, her mind blank.
Briarfang had come.
Everything would be fine now.
Springleaf was with him, and Crowclaw and Braveheart.
They'd know what to do.

Her Clanmates swarmed around her.

She felt their pelts brushing here as they leaned over Feathershine.

"A rouge attacked her," Poolpelt explained.
Her voice sounded as if it was coming from far away. "Rouges were hunting squirrels in our territory and we fought them off, and one attacked her."

"Braveheart" —Briarfang's order was brisk— "check that the rouges are gone and aren't coming back."
As Braveheart raced away, Briarfang grasped Feathershine's scruff.
"Be careful!" Poolpelt cautioned, heart lurching. "I think she's hurt."

She felt Snowheart's tail drape over her shoulders.
"Come on," the white she-cat murmured, coaxing her forward. "Let's get back to camp."

Poolpelt's black paws, numb with shock, stumbled over the snowy forest floor.
She's hurt. She's just hurt.

No matter how many times she repeated the words in her mind, her heart had recognized the scent of death on her sister.
She knew Feathershine was dead, and with each step the horror grew stronger, until grief threatened to swamp her.

"Just keep walking," Snowheart whispered, pressing closer.
"I told her she'd be back with Featherkit," Poolpelt mumbled.

At the top of the ravine, Briarfang laid Feathershine down and faced Poolpelt. He stared steadily at her until she blinked away the haze of grief and looked into his eyes.
"Poolpelt?" His mew was gentle.
"What?"
"You must tell Featherkit."
Poolpelt flinched. "Why me?"
"Because you love her," Briarfang told her. "I'll tell Blackfrost and make the report to Icestar."

Blindly stumbling, she managed to reach the bottom of the ravine. She padded into the snowy clearing and past her Clanmates, who knew nothing of the tragedy, who still believed Feathershine was

still alive.

She slid into the nursery. "Featherkit."
"You're back!" When Featherkit turned around and looked delighted, Poolpelt holded back tears escaping when she saw the striking resemble of Featherkit and Feathershine.
She glanced behind Poolpelt. "Is mom with you?"
Poolpelt took a deep breath and she tensed to stop her black paws from shaking. "Come outside, little one," she mewed.
"Has mom got a present for me?" Featherkit chirped.

Shadowkit stopped chasing Robinkit's tail. "Can I come, too?"
"Just Featherkit," Poolpelt told him, thanking StarClan that he listened for once.

Featherkit followed her out and she led her to a fallen and ducked in among the snowy branches.
"What is it? Where's mom?" She squeaked. "Is she playing hide-and-seek?"

"Come here." She wrapped her tail around her small body and pulled her close, sheltering her beside her belly.
She bent over her, shielding the sight of Briarfang carrying her mother's body into camp.
She felt her heart crack. *So much pain.*

"Feathershine won't be coming back."
Featherkit looked up at her. "Till when?"
"Ever."
"Why not?" Featherkit stiffened. "Doesn't she like me anymore?"
"She loves you very much," Poolpelt promised. "She'll always love you. But she's with StarClan now."

Featherkit put her head to one side. "Can I visit her?"
Poolpelt shook her head.
"Flowertail and Owlpaw visit StarClan all the time," Featherkit argued. "I can do it, too."
"It's not that easy."

With every word, Poolpelt felt herself getting more and more lost. How would she ever make her understand without breaking her

heart?
She gazed into her blue eyes.
The pain of Feathershine's death was not hers alone.
She was going to *have* to break her heart.
"She's dead, Featherkit. You won't see her anymore. You won't smell her or hear her or feel her fur next to yours ever again."

Ashfall nosed her way through the snow-filled branches. "I'll feed you and you'll share my nest with Splashkit, Robinkit and Riverkit," she soothed.
Featherkit spat at her. "I don't want your milk or your nest! I just want Feathershine!"

She pelted past the queen and galloped into the snowy clearing, stopping beside her mother's body. "I'll live out here now, with you," she squeaked, pressing her nose into her cold fur.

Poolpelt cowered into the snow-filled branches, raw with grief.
"I'll sit with her," Ashfall murmured, turning away.

Blackfrost stormed past her, forcing his way into the snow-filled branches. "How could you let it happen?" he yowled at Poolpelt.
"She should have been in the nursery with Featherkit!"
"I-I'm sorry."
"How could you even think of letting her put herself in danger when she had a kit to look after?" Blackfrost hissed.
Poolpelt stared hollow-eyed at her sister's mate.
He was right.
This was all her fault.

"Leave!" Icestar appeared behind Blackfrost.
She held a branch aside with her shoulders, leaving room to get out.
"This isn't helping any cat," she growled.
Blackfrost backed away, throwing a last angry glance at Poolpelt.

Icestar squeezed in beside her. Her eyes shone with sorrow.
"Briarfang told me."
Poolpelt stared at her black paws. "I can't lose Feathershine as well as Whiteclaw and Raindapple. Why did they both have to die?"

Icestar shook her head. "Only StarClan knows that."

"Then StarClan is stupid and cruel!"

"Life must go on." Icestar pressed against her. "You have other Clanmates."
"Not like them. They were kin!"
"Your Clan depends on you as much as Feathershine and Whiteclaw and Raindapple did. More so."

"I don't care!"
Icestar brushed her tail down her flank. "I know you *do* care. And I know you won't let your Clanmates down. You must go on, hunting and fighting and living for your Clan."
When she didn't reply, she licked her between the ears and padded away.

Poolpelt dug her claws into the snow and glared up at the pale gray sky, crisscrossed with snow-filled branches.
What was the point of being in a Clan when you couldn't keep your most precious Clanmates safe?

Chapter 30

[image] [image] [image]

Poolpelt hooked the dead mouse absently on her claw and let it fall onto the snow again with a damp *plop*.

She had no appetite.
Even the smell of fresh-kill made her queasy.

Lying alone at the edge of the snowy clearing, she studied her Clanmates through half-closed eyes.
They were sharing tongues before tonight's Gathering, murmuring cheerfully to one another as if Feathershine had never existed, though it was only a half moon since her death.
Even Featherkit had started to stray more and more from from Ashfall's side and was playing Pounce with Shadowkit outside the nursery.

Poolpelt rolled the mouse underneath her black paw, caking it with snow.

Rainpelt got to her paws and padded from the knot of warriors sharing prey beside the frozen nettle patch. She glanced at the mouse. "That's wasted fresh-kill now," she observed. Her tail was twitching. "Icestar wants you to go to the Gathering."
Poolpelt sighed. *Well, I don't want to go. And who made you my mentor? I'm a warrior now, remember?*
"It's time you started making an effort." Rainpelt looked sternly at her. "I've spared you from as many border patrols and hunting parties as I can, but all you do is mope around the camp. Perhaps if you started to act more like a Clan cat, you might feel better."

Rainpelt glanced towards Featherkit, who was struggling to pin Shadowkit to the ground. "And you could show a little more interest in Featherkit."
Poolpelt stared blankly at her kin.

Ashfall was taking good care of her. She didn't need her.
And the Clan seemed to be thriving without her help. After a rich greenleaf, they looked as well fed as DawnClan.

A low growl sounded in Rainpelt's throat. "You used to spend every spare moment with Featherkit. Now you never set paw in the nursery. She must feel like she's lost two mothers instead of one."
Poolpelt scowled at her. Why was she trying to make her feel worse?

She went on. "Blackfrost hasn't let grief stop him caring for his Clan. And he's spending more time with Featherkit, not less."
"Good for him," Poolpelt muttered.

"What makes you so special that you can get away without doing anything for your Clan?" Rainpelt demanded.
I lost my sister! Poolpelt bit back the reply though she wanted to wail it to the darkening sky.
Instead she hauled herself to her black paws. "Nothing makes me special," she growled. "I'll go to the Gathering if it makes you happy."

Rainpelt turned away and signaled with her tail.
Thornwing and Amberleaf were already at the camp entrance. They circled impatiently while the older warriors gathered.

Shadowkit bounced over, his black-tipped tail sticking straight up. He was starting to lose his fluffy kit fur, and broad, powerful shoulders and long legs were emerging from his body.
"Can I come?" he called. "I'll be an apprentice in a moon."
"Kits don't go to Gatherings," Rainpelt reminded him.

Shadowkit rushed over to Thornwing and batted at his shoulder with his black, front paws. "You will tell me everything when you get back, right?"
"You'll be asleep when I get back," Thornwing purred.
"No, I won't. I'm going to stay awake."

Duskwing, who was joining the patrol to Fourtrees for the first time since she'd kitted, shook her head. "You'd better be sound asleep when we get back. Ashfall will want some peace after having you

rascals charging around all day."
"We've been outside for *ages*," Shadowkit objected.
"And who's been keeping an eye on you to make sure you don't get into mischief? Ashfall said she had to get you out of the warriors's den three times."
Shadowkit shrugged. "We wanted to see what it was like. Anyway, I'm not tired, so why is Ashfall?"

Duskwing gave up and turned to Briarfang. "Do you think he'd be less argumentative if his father hanged around more?" she sighed.
Briarfang's whiskers twitched. "I don't think any cat could influence that young tom. He's going to make a great warrior."
Duskwing's eyes glowed. "I know."

Bladewing brushed against Poolpelt as he joined his Clanmates, Springleaf dipped her head to head, and Amberleaf stood beside her as though she were an apprentice who needed guiding.
Poolpelt pulled away.
There was nothing any of her Clanmates could do to ease her pain. She wished they wouldn't bother.

The snowy forest was crisp.
For the first time since greenleaf, Poolpelt remembered what it was like to shiver with cold as a chill wind rustled the snow-filled branches.

Owlpaw caught up to her and stared ahead. "She'll be watching you," she murmured.
Poolpelt knew she was talking about Feathershine.

She glanced up through the snow-filled branches at Silverpelt. What use was her sister up there? Her Clan needed her down here. "Have you and Flowertail seen her in your dreams?"
Owlpaw shook her head. "Not yet. But I know Feathershine would never stop looking out for you and Featherkit."
Poolpelt couldn't see what good that would do any of them.

Owlpaw let her pelt touch hers. "Featherkit will need your help to learn how to make the right choices, and how to care for her Clan like a true warrior."
"She has Ashfall and Duskwing," Poolpelt reminded her, "and

Swiftfur."

The black-and-white warrior had only just kitted. Lakekit, Dovekit, and Berrykit hadn't even opened their eyes yet.

Lakekit was a black she-kit with amber eyes..

OC belongs to NoahNeedsALife
While their sister, Dovekit, was a pale gray she-kit with a lighter muzzle, paws, tip-of tail, and underbelly and had emerald green eyes.

While their sister, Berrykit, was a cream-colored she-kit with red-ambered eyes and with a white underbelly.

"They'll care for her," Owlpaw agreed. "But you are the only cat in IceClan who can begin to take Feathershine's place. You are her kin."
"So is Blackfrost."
"Blackfrost will teach her how to be a fierce warrior," Owlpaw murmured. "But who will teach her that softness and strength can exist together? And that loyalty to the Clan comes from the heart, not through teeth and claws?"
The medicine-cat apprentice went on ahead, his paws silent on the forest floor, leaving Poolpelt to walk alone with her thoughts.
Blackfrost isn't like that though!... is he?

Trailing after her Clanmates as they padded through the silver forest, Poolpelt glanced again at the stars.
She tried to imagine Feathershine looking down from beside Whiteclaw and Raindapple.
But the stars looked like tiny fragments of ice sparkling in distant blackness.
Pretty to look at, but useless.
Utterly, utterly, useless.

The moon shone over Fourtrees like a cold white eye.
SmokeClan and DawnClan already mingled in the clearing.
EchoClan hared down from the moorland as IceClan arrived.
Excited voices shared news, and purrs warmed the chilly night air.
Poolpelt watched her Clanmates melt into the crowd, feeling far, far

away.

"Got your paws wet recently?"
A deep, familiar mew made her turn.
Goldenfur!
Even his appearance couldn't make her feel better,

"Don't you have any friends in your own Clan?" she sighed.
Goldenfur looked at her with sympathetic eyes. "I heard about Feathershine," he meowed. "I'm sorry."
"Why do you care?"
He stared at her for several moments, then murmured. "I care about *you*."

She sighed, and marched away.
At least this time the heart beating couldn't be heard from her anymore.

Poolpelt had nearly crashed into Springleaf.
The young black-and-orange tortoiseshell warrior caught Poolpelt's eyes. "What's wrong?"
"Goldenfur's been sticking his nose in where it doesn't belong," Poolpelt lied with a growl.
"Ignore him," Springleaf advised.

"Look!" Springleaf stared up at the Great Rock as the leaders bounded at the top.
"They're starting!" She hurried away, pushing through her Clan to get to the front.
Poolpelt was happy to loiter at the back.

Amberleaf sat beside her. "EchoClan's looking plump."
Poolpelt hadn't noticed, but now she realized that the moorland cats did seem healthy and well fed for once. "I hope they don't get too fat to catch rabbits," she muttered.
Amberleaf nudged her. "Don't be too grumpy."

Icestar was addressing the Clans. "IceClan has six new kits."
Murmurs of appreciation spread through the Clan.
"And a new warrior." The IceClan leader gazed down at her Clanmates. "Thornwing."

The young cat pricked his ears and straightened their whiskers as the Clan called his name.

As the cheers died away, Icestar went on with her report.
"We chased a fox back into Twolegplace and halted the kittypet intrusions."
Thanks a lot, Sunpaw. She thought angrily of the trouble the she-cat was causing for her Clan.

"SmokeClan has a new medicine cat." It was Darkstar's turn.
He nodded toward a fluffy ginger tom with a strong build and one piercing yellow eye. "Almanditeye will work alongside Icewhisker from now on."
Sparrowstar nodded respectfully. "Welcome, Almanditeye."
"May StarClan light your path," Icestar meowed.
Miststar padded forward. "I pray that your ancestors guide you wisely in your duties."

Poolpelt's gaze drifted to the foot of the Great Rock.
To her surprise, Coldgaze, the SmokeClan deputy, was narrowing his eyes at Almanditeye.
The ginger tom shot him a look sharper than flint.
Had the two Clanmates just quarreled? Poolpelt twitched her ears.

Miststar began her report. "EchoClan has thrived this greenleaf. We have never seen so many rabbits on the moor, and we've made the most of StarClan's bountiful gift."

Sparrowstar stepped forward. "DawnClan, too, has enjoyed rich prey. We also have a new warrior, Sunspots!"
Sunspots puffed out her chest in pride as the Clan cats started chanting her name.

Sparrowstar glanced down at his Clan and Poolpelt realized the DawnClan leader was looking straight at Goldenfur. "Only one cloud shadows our horizon."
He nodded to the DawnClan warrior. "Goldenfur has more information."
Goldenfur nodded and bounded onto the Great Rock.

Shock murmured through the Clans.

"I am sorry," Goldenfur began, his voice carrying clearly across the hollow. "I do not belong here, but with so many cats I was afraid you wouldn't be able to hear me from down there."
He nodded to the shadowy base of the rock. "I hope you will forgive my boldness. I do not mean to offend."
The murmuring ceased.
Ears pricked up and muzzles were raised to hear what the young DawnClan warrior would say next.

"Smooth," Poolpelt meowed, feeling as if she couldn't have fallen any deeper in love with him.
"I know," Amberleaf breathed, "and so handsome."

Poolpelt looked at her best friend. "What about cats in our Clan? What about.. uh.. Ravenbird?"
Amberleaf raised an eyebrow. "*Ravenbird?* Tell me what it is you like about Ravenbird. Tell me."
When she spoke, he was grooming his paw and looked over at them when they said his name.

Poolpelt sighed in frustration. "I misspoke! I meant- to say.. Owlpaw."
As Springleaf padded towards them, Amberleaf purred. "Springleaf, get this. Poolpelt *likes* Owlpaw."
Springleaf grinned. "Oooo! I'm going to tell her!"
Poolpelt wrapped her black paw over Springleaf's mouth. "I was *joking!*"

"Hush!" Amberleaf meowed. "He's speaking."

"Twolegs have set up a camp on our land. Their nests are small, and they keep changing as new Twolegs come and old Twolegs go. During greenleaf, I led the patrols that monitored the intrusion." His mew was calm and clear.
His gaze brushed the Clans, holding the attention of every cat. "We wanted to discover the Twoleg's intentions, whether this was the beginning of a bigger invasion or the start of a new Twolegplace. As far as we can tell, the new camp exists to house Twolegs without proper nests. They bring their own dens, made of soft flapping pelts, and take them away when they leave. Though they stray from their camp, they seem peaceful and prefer to head out of DawnClan's

territory. So far no Twoleg has come near DawnClan's camp. But we have plans in place to distract them if they should."

Mews of approval sounded from the Clans.
"Wise idea," Briarfang murmured.
Echoleap of EchoClan nodded to one of her Clanmates. "Sounds like they're handling the situation well."

Sparrowstar finished the report as Goldenfur slid unobtrusively from the rock. "The Twolegs are coming less often now that leaf-fall is here. Let us hope that the freezing leaf-bare weather will drive them away together."

"Wow." Amberleaf leaned against Poolpelt. "Why don't we have a warrior like that in IceClan?" she sighed.
Poolpelt pretended like she didn't know what Amberleaf meant. "Like Sparrowstar?"
"No, frost-brain!" Amberleaf nudged her. "Like Goldenfur."
"In case you hadn't noticed, he's *DawnClan.* There may be a truce, but we're still supposed to be loyal to our own Clanmates."
Poolpelt felt uncomfortable hearing Amberleaf mooning over Goldenfur.
Am I jealous?

The leaders were jumping down from the Great Rock.
It seemed that the rich greenleaf had brought harmony to the Clans, and there was nothing more to discuss.
Perhaps they'd be home before Shadowkit was asleep after all.

Poolpelt padded up the slope, pulling ahead of her Clanmates.
The memory of his gaze in the moonlight lingered in her mind.

Snow crunched as paw steps sounded as Icestar caught up. "Are you in a hurry to get home?" she asked, puffing slightly.
"I just want to get to my nest."
"Are you tired?"
"A little."
"Good." The IceClan's leader mew was gentle. "I've noticed you haven't been sleeping well."
Is it any wonder? Poolpelt's pelt prickled once again.

"I'm glad you came tonight."
"Did I have any choice?"
"We always have a choice," Icestar mewed firmly.
Poolpelt didn't reply. She wondered what the IceClan leader really wanted to say.

"For example," she went on.
Here we go.
"You can choose whether to help your Clan or be a burden to it."
"I'm not a burden."

Icestar didn't seem interested in Poolpelt's objections. "You can choose whether to remember Feathershine by resting your chin on your paws all day or by being the warrior she would expect you to be."
It felt like they'd had this conversation before. Over Whiteclaw and Raindapple.

"You've had much grief for two cats," Icestar admitted. "But life goes on. Featherkit will become an apprentice and then a warrior, and you can choose to help her with that or let her work it out for herself."

The IceClan leader glanced at her as they crossed a snowy glade flooded with gray moonlight. "I have high hopes for you, Poolpelt. You were my apprentice once, and I will always feel like your mentor. I want you to strive to become the best warrior you can be, because I believe one day IceClan will have need of your gifts."

Poolpelt slowed to a stop and allowed Icestar to continue on without her.
Does she know about the prophecy?
Surely not, or she would have said something.
Besides, blazing through the forest at the head of her Clan didn't seem so exciting now that Feathershine, Whiteclaw and Raindapple couldn't share her success.

As her Clanmates thronged around her at the top of the ravine, Poolpelt gazed across the snowy valley with Flowertail's words echoing in her head.

Like the bluest flames, you will be blazing through the ice. But beware: Even the most powerful blazes can be destroyed by sun and teeth.

Chapter 31

When sleep came, it came furiously, chaotic with images and sounds.

Poolpelt dreamed of stars swirling above a wind-tossed forest.
The gale tugged her fur as it swept from the moorland to the edge of the gorge where she teetered, staring down into the foaming torrent far below.

A blotch of pale white pelt was spinning in the crashing waters, flung downstream by the raging current.
"Feathershine!" Poolpelt's panicked screech was whipped away by the wind.
Below, her sister disappeared, sucked down by the water, then thrown up again just long enough to shriek, "Featherkit!"

Horror clutched Poolpelt's heart as she saw a smaller scrap spinning in the current farther downstream.
"My daughter!" Feathershine's yowl echoed from the towering walls of rock that channeled the water into a seething fury.

"No!" Poolpelt raced along the edge of the gorge, scrabbling over boulders, leaping ledges, heading downstream to where she knew the gorge opened into calmer waters.
She could reach Feathershine and Featherkit there, if the jagged rocks jutting midstream did not batter them to death first.

She felt their terror, sensed their paws churning helplessly against the massive flood as the water wrenched them down, filling their ears and eyes and noses.
She felt their aching lungs gasp for breath as they struggled to reach air.
She felt their fragile bodies slam past rocks and be dragged over grazing stone, buffeted by boulder after boulder as the current swept them mercilessly on.

Where the gorge ended and the water flowed out past gently sloping shores, Poolpelt waded into the shallows and peered upstream, searching for Feathershine and Featherkit.
The water drenched her pelt, tried to pull her away from the cliffs, but she dug in her claws, gripping the riverbed and praying to StarClan.

Feathershine appeared first, flung out of the canyon with her head barely above the water.
"Save my daughter!" Her terrified shriek was choked by the water as the river sucked her under again.
"Feathershine!" Hysterical, Poolpelt tried to wade toward her sister, but the torrent pushed her back.

A scrap of pale white fur bobbed toward her.
Featherkit.
She could save her. The tiny shape hurtled toward her, her paws flailing, her squeals piercing the air.
I won't let you die.

Plunging in up to her chin, Poolpelt lunged for her as she passed, grabbing her scruff in her teeth and pulling her close. Poolpelt churned her black paws until she felt the riverbed beneath them, then dragged her, limp, onto the bank.

"You're safe now," she gasped, coughing water. "It's all right." Her mew grew fierce as she willed her to open her eyes. "I won't let anything hurt you, ever!"
But Featherkit lay still, water bubbling at her lips, and streaming from her pelt.
Poolpelt fought down a wave of panic. *Wake up! I saved you!* She shivered as she felt the chill of water running in rivulets down her neck.

"Fox dung!" came Springleaf's complaint. "It was raining last night."
Poolpelt sat bolt upright.
She leaped out of her nest and bolted from the den, running down the slope of the warriors's den.

"Featherkit!" she called as she scrambled into the night-shadowed

nursery.
Eyes flashed in the darkness, round with alarm.
"Poolpelt?" Ashfall's frightened mew sounded from the darkness. "What's wrong?"
Poolpelt scanned the den, searching for Featherkit's pale white pelt. "Where is she?" she demanded.
Oh StarClan, I can't lose her as well!

"Poolpelt!" A delighted mew sounded from Ashfall's nest and Poolpelt saw Featherkit's pelt glowing in the darkness. "What are you doing here? It's the middle of the night!"
She raced to her, curling herself around her small body, wrapping Featherkit to her and closing her eyes gratefully. *Thank StarClan, it was only a dream.*
"Oof, you're squashing me!" Featherkit protested.
She wriggled, then yawned and relaxed against Poolpelt's flank. Hardly daring to breath, Poolpelt watched her sleep until the dawn light began to filter through the stone den.

She woke up with a start, her eyes wide. "I thought I'd dreamed you'd come to see me," she chirped. "I'm so glad you're here. I've missed you."
She stretched up to lick her cheek and Poolpelt felt a stab of guilt. How could she have wanted to abandon her? She was all she had left to remind her of Feathershine.

"Look what I've learned." Featherkit scrambled away from her and crouched on the stone floor, her tail straight and belly pressed on the stone floor in a perfect hunting crouch.
"That's great," Poolpelt purred. "Who taught you that?"
"Thornwing," Featherkit mewed proudly.
She blinked at her, her blue eyes's so much like her mother's. "Will you teach me some battle moves?"
"When you're a little older."

Lakekit was struggling out of Swiftfur's nest. Her black pelt gleamed in the pale dawn.
Featherkit scrambled over to her. "Do you want me to show you the hunter's crouch?" she mewed.
Lakekit nodded and hunkered down while Featherkit steadied her tail. "You have to keep it really still," she muttered through the

mouthful of fur.

"Thank you for looking after her so well," Poolpelt mewed to Ashfall.
The gray queen lifted her head. Splashkit, Robinkit and Riverkit stirred against her belly with mews of protest. "She's a lovely kit," Ashfall purred.
Poolpelt felt a stone lodge in her throat. "I wish I'd visited more often."
Ashfall touched the tip of her tail to Poolpelt's shoulder. "Kits are very forgiving," she murmured. "She won't remember what you didn't do, only what you did. You can change everything if you want to."
Poolpelt gazed into her blue eyes. "I do."

"Attack!" Featherkit gave a warning yowl and launched herself at Poolpelt.
Her tiny claws prickled her pelt as she dangled from her fur. Growing like a badger, she stomped around the den, pretending to try to throw her off while she squeaked with delight.

Fur scraped at the entrance.
"Dad!" Featherkit greeted her father with a happy mew as the tom padded into the nursery.

Blackfrost looked over his daughter's head and scowled at Poolpelt. "What are you doing here?"
"Just visiting Featherkit," Poolpelt said simply, confused why he was scowling at her.
"Icestar wants you on patrol," Blackfrost told her. "You should go." He narrowed his eyes. "The sooner, the better."

He turned to Featherkit, and tumbled her out of the nursery with a hefty paw. "Now, young warrior, are you ready to practice those battle moves I showed you?"
He pushed his way out after his kit. "You never know when some mangy DawnClan furball is going to steal into camp."

Poolpelt followed, her ears twitching. Featherkit was too young for battle training. "She might get hurt!" she protested.
Blackfrost was already urging the young kit to rear up on her hind

legs. "Come on, my little warrior. See if you can duck this." He swiped a paw close to Featherkit's ear.
Poolpelt caught up to them. "Stop! She's not ready!"

Blackfrost curled his lip. "How would you know?" he challenged. "You've hardly looked at her in the last moon."
Poolpelt flinched.
"I'm all she has now," Blackfrost went on. "And I'll bring her up to be a warrior the Clan can be proud of."
"She has me, too!" Poolpelt argued.

But Blackfrost was already shooing Featherkit away.
Poolpelt watched them go, feeling hollow.

She could swear she heard Flowertail murmur, "A darkness has ice sharp as claws," she whispered. "Don't let Featherkit get hurt by them."
Poolpelt turned, but the medicine cat was already shambling away, mumbling to herself.

Was she warning her about Blackfrost?
Surely Featherkit was safe with her father?
Poolpelt and the whole Clan trusts him, and he had proved to be strong and loyal.

She looked back at him with uncertainty prickling her pelt.
He was instructing Featherkit again. "Now when you dive, try twisting at the last moment."
Was the young kit really ready for such an advanced battle move?

"There you are, Poolpelt!" Icestar called to her from below Highrock. "I'm organizing the patrols." Springleaf, Bladewing, Briarfang and Briarpool were around her.
Amberleaf and Thornwing paced back and forth.

Shaking her whiskers to clear her thoughts, Poolpelt padded over to join them. "Where's Rainpelt?" The IceClan deputy usually managed the patrols.
"She's sick," Icestar told her.
"Haven't you noticed how thin she's been looking lately?" Springleaf commented.

Poolpelt realized that for too long she hadn't noticed much apart from her own grief. "Is Flowertail treating her?"
Icestar nodded. "She says she can make her more comfortable."
"Does she know what's wrong?"
Icestar's eyes darkened. "No, but she says this bout should pass in a few days, like the others."
Rainpelt has suffered other bouts of sickness?

Poolpelt suddenly felt anxious. Leaf-bare lay ahead like a lion waiting in ambush. It was no time to be ill. "Blackfrost told me you wanted me for patrol," she mewed to Icestar.
"The dawn patrol's left now."
"Sorry." Poolpelt's tail dropped. "I'll go with the next one."

Icestar shrugged. "Doesn't matter. I was glad to hear you were visiting Featherkit." She glanced over at the pale white kit, still training with her father. "You can go hunting with Blackfrost instead."
Poolpelt's heart sank.
At least it would get Blackfrost away from his daughter for a while. Not that she wanted to separate Featherkit from her father, of course.

The treecutplace monster growled in the distance as Poolpelt followed Blackfrost through the snowy pines.
At this time of year, when the snowy undergrowth elsewhere in IceClan's territory was brittle and flattered by rain, the snowy forest around Tallpines was as good a place as any to try to track prey.

"Of course, Icestar will have to make a move on Icerocks soon." Blackfrost had been proclaiming that their new leader should run DawnClan all the way out of the ravine, and Poolpelt was tired of listening.
"The other Clans are expecting it," he went on. "They'll think we're weak if we let those sun-faces hold on to our territory through leaf-bare."

Poolpelt halted as Blackfrost disappeared behind a neatly piled stack of wood.
She scented squirrel.

She crouched with her ears pricked and heard the scampering of tiny paws.
She spotted its gray pelt bobbing over the soft, snowy floor.
Hardly big enough to feed the elders, but it would have to do.

She turned her attention back to the squirrel.
"Invaders!" Blackfrost's yowl sent the squirrel scooting up a snow-filled tree.
Fox dung!

Poolpelt bounded onto the pile of cut wood. "What is it?"
She peered down at Blackfrost, who was scanning the snow-filled woods with his hackles up.
When she tasted the air, she could scent nothing but the sour tang of Twolegplace and the kittypet stench that went with it.

Blackfrost dropped to his belly. "Kittypet invasion," he hissed. "Follow me."
Poolpelt bounded down the log pile and followed.
There was only a slight scent of kittypet—not exactly an invasion.
She didn't see why Blackfrost was making such a fuss.

"It smells like a kit," she pointed out.
"Kits turn into cats," Blackfrost growled.
"Not in one afternoon."

He turned on her. "Do you want to share our prey with those spoiled fatties?"
"That's not what I said," Poolpelt replied calmly. She sat up. "Let's get back to hunting."

But Blackfrost had already crossed the border and was darting toward a Twoleg fence.
He climbed up and stalked along the top.
"Come back!" Poolpelt hissed. "That's not our territory!"
"There are no kittypet scent markers warning me to keep out," Blackfrost spat.

She scooted after him. "Keep your voice down!"
"Are you scared of them?"
"I just don't see why you need to start a fight!"

Blackfrost leaped down and faced her. "You know what your problem is, Poolpelt? You're soft. Soft on warriors from other Clans and soft on kittypets. I've seen you talk to Sunspots at Gatherings, AND I saw you talking to Goldenfur last night. Do you care about your Clan at all?"
"Of course I do!" Poolpelt hissed. How dare he make her defend her loyalty? "And I wasn't exactly having a friendly chat with Goldenfur!"

"Well, I need more proof before I let you near Featherkit." Blackfrost headed back into the snowy trees.
Poolpelt hurried after. "She's my kin, too!"

"You weren't there when she needed you," Blackfrost snarled. "I was. Just keep away from her... or I'll make you."

Chapter 32

Poolpelt was shocked, too shocked to reply to his threat.
The real Blackfrost would never threaten a Clanmate..

She only ignored his threat and rolled her eyes, "Well, there's no prey around, so let's head back to camp."
She spun around and raced back through the snowy forest, snow crunching beneath her black paws.

"Back so soon?" Icestar was scrambling to the top of the ravine when she reached it.
Poolpelt looked at her with her mouth-half open, still unable to explain of what Blackfrost had said.
"No prey?" Icestar pressed.
How could she tell her about Blackfrost's threat? Who would believe that a loyal warrior would say such a thing to a Clanmate? She hardly believed it herself.

"Prey was poor, so I came back to early to spend time with Featherkit."
Icestar tipped her head to one side. "I'm glad," she meowed. "You'll be good for her."

She paused. "You seem like your old self today."
Do I? She stared at her, hoping it was true.

"Go and see Featherkit," she told her briskly. "I reckon by the time she is made an apprentice, you'll be ready for an apprentice of your own. Helping raising Featherkit will give you some worthwhile practice."
"Th-thanks." Poolpelt was caught off guard by the IceClan's leader's warmth.
She was afraid that she'd done nothing to earn it.

She slid her black paws over the edge of the ravine and jumped down.
"Next time, though, don't give up on the prey!" Icestar called after her.
"I won't!" she promised.

Featherkit was fast asleep when she poked her head in the nursery.
"She was tired after her feed," Ashfall apologized. "I think Blackfrost wore her out."
Poolpelt nuzzled her gently and she rolled in her sleep and rested her small paw against her muzzle.
It was as soft as snow.
Poolpelt breathed in the scent of her—so like her sister and backed out of the nursery.

"How's the prey running?" Braveheart's mew surprised her.
"Not so good."
"Where'd you go?"
"Tallpines."

Braveheart glanced past her shoulder at the nursery. "How's Featherkit?"
"Fine."
"She's lucky to have you to watch out for her."

"I don't know." Poolpelt looked at her black paws. "I've not done too great so far."
"You've had a lot to deal with." His gaze grew soft. "I think you'd make a great mother."
Poolpelt opened her mouth, searching for words, her ears hot.
Braveheart realized what he said and a large blush spreaded across his face.

"There's Amberleaf!"
Relieved to see her denmate padding past with a shrew in her jaws, Poolpelt bounded away and fell in beside her.

Amberleaf dropped the shrew on the fresh-kill pile. "You and Braveheart make such a great couple."
Poolpelt backed away. She'd been hoping to escape embarrassment, not make it worse. And she *still* didn't know who her heart belonged

to. "He's sweet, but we're not a couple." *Yet.*
"Really?"

"I'm too busy with Featherkit to worry about stuff like that," Poolpelt muttered.
"But you must have time to look for a mate, and Braveheart is obviously interested in you."

"Feathershine's kit is more important," Poolpelt insisted. "Now that she's got no mother, it's up to me to look after her." There was this uncomfortable feeling that Blackfrost may not be the best influence for Featherkit. There was more to being a Clan cat than fighting and chasing off trespassers.

Amberleaf was still chatting. "I've just seen Rainpelt," she reported. "She's in the medicine den. Says she's too sick to eat. Maybe she'll stop being Clan deputy?"
"What?" Poolpelt snapped from her thoughts.
"Icestar will have to appoint someone else."
Poolpelt blinked. "Hawkflame?" The dark brown tabby warrior would be pleased.

"Or Briarfang?" Amberleaf suggested.
Poolpelt narrowed her eyes.
The deputy needed to have wisdom as well as courage.
Not that Briarfang was frost-brained, but he saw only as far as the battle and never beyond.

"Maybe Blackfrost."
Amberleaf's new suggestion made Poolpelt gasp. "He's too young!"
"He says he's going to be the youngest deputy the Clans have ever seen."
"No way."
"He talks about it all the time," Amberleaf meowed. "Deputy!" She snorted. "As if Icestar would give him the chance to lead us all into battle at the flick of a tail!"

Rigidly keeping her feelings for Braveheart out of her mind, Poolpelt rummaged through Stormclaw's nest and plucked out the last ragged scrap of moss.

With no apprentices in the Clan, the younger warriors were taking turns cleaning out the elders's den.
Since Poolpelt had returned early from her morning patrol, she had volunteered to see to the elders by herself.

"Thornwing's going to bring fresh bracken later," she told him.
"Well, I hope it's not too much later," Stormclaw complained. "You've hardly left me anything to rest on."
Swiftwing purred. "You've got plenty of padding to keep you comfortable till then."
It was true; after a prey-rich greenleaf, Stormclaw was fatter than ever.

"I promised Owlpaw I'd check you for ticks as well," Poolpelt meowed.
Stormclaw shook his broad head. "We can do that ourselves," he assured her.
"But what if—!"
"If we find any, I'll go to Owlpaw for the bile myself."
"Thanks." Poolpelt was grateful.
She wanted to be out in the snow forest patrolling and hunting for her Clan.
She had a lot of catching up to do.

Just then, however, Icestar called from outside the Elders's den. "All cats old enough to drift in the snow, gather below the Highrock for a Clan meeting!"

Poolpelt let out a purr of amusement when she saw Splashkit, Robinkit, Dovekit, Berrykit, Riverkit, Lakekit bundling out of the nursery to find out what was going on.
Shadowkit was already in the middle of the snowy clearing, gazing up at Icestar, when Poolpelt padded toward the center of the clearing.

Swiftfur and Ashfall were padding out of the nursery, their kits wiggling out beside them, bright with excitement.
Springleaf and Snowheart were on their paws beside the frozen nettle patch.
Thornwing and Ravenbird hurried to join their Clanmates.
Briarfang had been stretched outside the warriors's den, and padded

down to join his Clanmates, and Dawnstripe had been chatting with Crowclaw and Bladewing at the edge of the snowy clearing.
They all came to join Flowertail and Owlpaw, who sat beside Bluefeather with their tails wrapped neatly over their paws.

As Poolpelt settled beside Amberleaf, she noticed Rainpelt, thin and trembling, crouched on the deputy spot on the Highrock.
The Clan stared expectantly at the IceClan leader.

"Clanmates, it's time to welcome a new apprentice." Icestar said, her eyes fixed on Shadowkit.
Duskwing quivered with pride.

"Shadowkit, step forward."
Shadowkit nodded and did so.
"Shadowkit, you have reached the age of six moons, and it is time for you to be apprenticed. From this day on, until you receive your warrior name, you will be known as Shadowpaw."

Poolpelt leaned forward, eager to know who his mentor would be. Only that morning, Icestar had hinted that Poolpelt was nearly ready for her own apprentice.

"Blackfrost will be your mentor."
The black warrior padded forward, tail high, and pressed his muzzle to Shadowpaw's head.
"Shadowpaw! Shadowpaw!"

Amberleaf leaned closer, her breath warm in Poolpelt's ear. "Now he's going to be even more convinced he'll be the next deputy," she whispered.
A shiver ran down Poolpelt's spine and started feeling an odd twinge, as though she were about to go into battle.

Something small brushed behind her.
She turned to see Featherkit, who had crept away from her denmates. "I'm glad she didn't make Shadowpaw your apprentice," she mewed. "I want you to be *my* mentor."

Poolpelt glanced at Icestar.
She was watching, eyes narrow. She nodded as though agreeing

with Featherkit.
She would be a mentor soon.
But would it be soon enough to let her become the next Clan deputy?
Her belly tightened when she saw Rainpelt padding uneasily back toward the medicine den.

Icestar dipped her head. "I have one more announcement," the IceClan leader meowed.

"Darkcloud, step forward."
Darkcloud padded forward as Icestar went on.
"Darkcloud, is it your wish to give up the name of a warrior and go to join the elders?"
Darkcloud dipped his head. "It is."
Icestar purred. "Your Clan honors you and all the service you have given to us. I call upon StarClan to give you many moons of rest."

Poolpelt blinked.
She hadn't realized Darkcloud was so old, though now that she thought about it, she realized the black tom tom often trailed at the back of the patrols and brought home smaller and weaker fresh-kill than his Clanmates did.
For the first time she noticed flecks of gray around the warrior's muzzle.

Darkcloud dipped his head. "I am grateful to my Clan for giving me the chance to serve them this long, and for the peaceful life I will have as an elder," he meowed formally.

His Clanmates steamed around him, brushing muzzles, flicking tails.

Shadowpaw shouldered his way through the crowd and touched his nose to Darkcloud's. "I'll take better care of you than any other apprentice!" he promised.
"That won't be hard," Amberleaf whispered. "Considering he's the only one."

Poolpelt's whiskers twitched in amusement, but she couldn't help admiring the young tom's eagerness, remembering how much she'd resented the dull chores like cleaning out dens.

Shadowpaw was certainly determined to live by the warrior code.

"Finally—!" Icestar had one more announcement— "while Rainpelt is ill, Hawkflame will stand in as deputy."
Briarfang nodded to his denmate and Hawkflame puffed out his chest.

"Rainpelt will return to her duties once she's recovered," Icestar added.
Uneasy glances flashed between Briarfang, Springleaf, Snowheart, Ravenbird and Hawkflame.
Clearly the senior warriors weren't as certain of Rainpelt's recovery as their leader was.

Flowertail stepped forward. "I need help gathering herbs," she announced.
"Poolpelt?" Flowertail tipped her head to one side. "Would you come?"

Poolpelt glanced at Icestar, waiting for permission.
The IceClan leader nodded.
Anxiety fluttered in her belly.
Why had Flowertail picked her?

She felt less than comfortable as she followed the golden dappled she-cat into the snowy forest.
Did she want to talk about the prophecy?

Perhaps StarClan had told her about her meeting with Goldenfur, and the feelings he'd stirred in her that she had been trying so hard to ignore.
StarClan, after all, saw everything.
Why *wouldn't* they share it with the Clan's medicine cat?

"I see you've taken an interest in Featherkit," Flowertail observed as they climbed a snowy slope.
"She's my kin," she mewed.

"I'm glad you're watching out for her," Flowertail went on. "She's got a good heart, but young kits are easily influenced."

Was she warning her about Blackfrost again?
She wanted to ask her straight out, but didn't dare.
After all, Blackfrost was a loyal warrior who'd done nothing but protect and feed his Clan.
Her worries might sound weird.

"Have you thought about the prophecy?" she asked.
So she *had* remembered!
She nodded.
"Good."

Flowertail stopped beside a small, leafy plant that smelled zesty.
Poolpelt wrinkled her nose as Flowertail began to tear off leaves with her paws. "Harvest it like this," she ordered. "Don't use your teeth, or your tongue will be numb for days."

Poolpelt nodded and began to pluck the leaves.
They were surprisingly strong for such lush-looking leaves, and she found herself having to tug hard to pull them up.
Flowertail padded to a smooth silver birch and started tearing off stripe of the bark with deft claws.
The strips curled in a pile beside her on the snow.

"Have you thought of becoming the next Clan deputy?" she asked, without looking around.
Poolpelt hesitated. Should she admit her ambition? She was still young. Would she think she was greedy?
"So you have," Flowertail concluded. "That's good."

"But I don't even have an apprentice yet," Poolpelt pointed out. "There's no way Icestar will make me deputy. I'm too young."
"Rainpelt won't die yet," Flowertail rasped. "There's still time. But you're going to have to work for it."

Poolpelt wasn't convinced. "There are so many warriors more experienced than me. Briarfang, for example."

"Icestar wants a cat with youth and energy to serve beside her." Flowertail peeled off another curl of silver bark. "If she wants advice, she can go to the senior warriors any time she likes. She doesn't have to make them deputy for that. Her deputy must be a

cat she feels she can train—a cat who is not set in old ways, a cat who is open to new ideas."

"Someone like Blackfrost?" Poolpelt ventured.
Flowertail growled. "That young warrior is the reason you *must* become deputy. Blood lies in his path. Flames lies in yours."

Poolpelt stopped pulling leaves as she felt the medicine cat's gaze burn her fur.
She was staring at her, her eyes ablaze. "You must concentrate on *nothing* else!" she hissed. "What could be better in this time of bitter frost than a blazing blue fire? Your Clan needs you. Don't let *anything* distract you!"

Did she mean Featherkit? Surely not!
She had only just encouraged her to help raise the young she-cat.
But what else could she mean?
Goldenfur?

"Take these herbs back." Flowertail pushed her curls of bark onto Poolpelt's pile of leaves. "And leave me in peace."

Dizzy with surprise, Poolpelt hardly tasted the tang of the herbs as she grasped them in her jaws and padded unsteadily back to camp.

Was this part of the prophecy?
If only Feathershine were alive, she could talk to her about it.
Feathershine might make sense of the medicine cat's warnings.
Even if she didn't believe them, her honesty might help Poolpelt untangle the jumble of emotions seething in her belly.

A dark brown tabby flashed through a swath of frozen ferns ahead.
Braveheart.

"Hi!" He greeted her warmly. "Can I help?"
Her mouth full, Poolpelt nodded and dropped some of her load.
Braveheart picked it up and headed away to the ravine.

Poolpelt wondered if he'd been waiting for her.
She felt admiration purr in her throat, but it felt like there was a strong pulse in her heart that stopped her from showing any

affection for Braveheart.
Goldenfur.

They bounded down the ravine and took the herbs to the medicine den.
Dropping them at Owlpaw's paws, Poolpelt spotted Rainpelt's damp pelt poking from a nest hollowed the medicine den.

"Is she going to be okay?" she whispered.
"These herbs should help," Owlpaw replied.
Rainpelt won't die yet. Flowertail's words rang in Poolpelt's ears.
But there had been urgency in the medicine cat's words.
Rainpelt wasn't going to live forever, and she had to be ready.

Braveheart was waiting for her when she emerged from the stone tunnel. "So, who do you think will be our next deputy?"
Poolpelt stared at him in shock. Had he overheard her talking with Flowertail? "What?"
"Well, Owlpaw only said the herbs would *help*. She didn't say that Rainpelt was going to be okay."
He hasn't heard anything. Thank StarClan.
"I guess."

"Blackfrost's got his heart set on it," Braveheart went on.
Poolpelt tensed.
"But," Braveheart mewed thoughtfully, "there are plenty of senior warriors to choose from. Hawkflame is the logical choice."
"Unless Icestar prefers youth to experience." Poolpelt founded herself using Flowertail's argument.
Braveheart glanced at her. "I hadn't thought of that."

His nose twitched as they neared the fresh-kill pile.
Two juicy sparrows lay on top. "You hungry?"
Poolpelt shifted her black paws, relieved to see Amberleaf eating alone. "I'd better keep Amberleaf company," she meowed quickly and, grabbing a sparrow, hurried to join her friend.

She passed Briarfang and Briarpool in the usual spot beside the frozen nettle patch, sharing a squirrel.
They spent so much time together now that most of the Clan were waiting for an announcement about kits.

Poolpelt continued through the camp.
Bluefeather and Snowheart were alining the outside of the nursery with pebbles.

Ashfall had brought Featherkit out of the nursery and was washing her.
"Hello, Poolpelt!" she called, trying to duck away from Ashfall's tongue, but Ashfall pulled her back and held her still with a firm paw.

Amberleaf looked up as Poolpelt approached. "I have *never* seen any cat look so disappointed," She was gazing at Braveheart, who looked lost beside the fresh-kill pile.
"Shut *up.*" Poolpelt didn't need to be reminded of the guilt she felt when she left him.

A memory flashed in her eyes.

"Haha! You got in trouble with Mom!"
"Shut up."
"You said a bad word!"
"It is not! I hear Swiftfur say it all the time!"

Poolpelt shook her head and flung her sparrow on the snow and lay down.

"What is wrong with you?" Amberleaf demanded. "I wish *I* had a cat following me around like that."
Poolpelt rolled her eyes. "Amberleaf, getting a mate is the least of my worries."

Amberleaf's gaze sharpened. "You have your eyes on the deputyship, don't you?"
Poolpelt's ears burned. "So what if I do?"
Amberleaf shrugged. "Well, not many cats get to be deputy, so don't miss out on other things while you're waiting."

Shadowpaw burst through the stone tunnel, his eyes bright.
Blackfrost padded after.
They must have been training.

Shadowpaw was still bursting with energy. "Can we practice those battle moves again?" he asked his mentor.
"Practice by yourself for a while." Blackfrost padded to the fresh-kill pile.
"But who am I going to fight?" Shadowpaw called after him.
"Use your imagination," Blackfrost growled back.

Shadowpaw glanced around the snowy clearing.
Poolpelt stiffened when the young apprentice's gaze came to rest on Featherkit, dozing beside Ashfall in the afternoon sunshine.
Relief flooded her as his gaze moved on.

"I could fight a whole Clan of enemies," he boasted to no cat in particular.

Darkcloud was padding snow across the snowy clearing. He looked up. "DawnClan had better watch out," he purred.

Duskwing trotted down from the warriors's den. "You're back," she meowed happily. She sniffed her son's pelt. "Any injuries?"
"Not yet." Shadowpaw sounded disappointed.
"But I learned a new move. Watch this!" He kicked his hind legs in the air, then landed with a twist and a slash of a forepaw.

Robinkit, Riverkit and Splashkit had slid out of the nursery to watch the young tom.
Splashkit's eyes were huge and round with admiration.

"Very good!" Briarfang called from beside the frozen nettle patch.
Hawkflame nodded. "I couldn't do better."

Poolpelt narrowed her eyes. The strength in the young tom's shoulders was impressive.

Only Flowertail didn't look up to admire Shadowpaw.
She hunched tighter over her fresh-kill. "I'm sorry, StarClan," she muttered. "That cat should not have survived. This was never meant to happen."

Startled, Poolpelt looked around.
None of the other cats seemed to have heard her.

Only her.

Does Flowertail believe that Shadowpaw should have died?

Chapter 33

[image]

"Look!" Featherkit trotted across the snowy clearing and tossed a moss ball at Splashkit. "I found another one!"
Splashkit crouched, ready to pounce, but Riverkit and Robinkit scooted past her and pawed the ball to each other.
Lakekit, Dovekit, and Berrykit sat like three baby owls outside the nursery, their eyes fixed on the moss as the older kits tossed it back and forth.

Poolpelt purred as it rolled to her black paws. She hooked it up and held it high, making the kits jump for it.

Ashfall and Swiftfur lay dozing in the pale leaf-bare sun. Ashfall opened one eye. "Thanks for keeping them busy, Poolpelt."
"I enjoy it!" She tossed the moss ball into the air and watched the kits scramble for it.

It was easier to play with Featherkit now that Blackfrost was out with Shadowpaw so much.
He was working his apprentice hard, waking him before dawn and drilling him in the cold hollow any time they weren't patrolling or hunting.
Shadowpaw had grown so quickly that he looked like a warrior after only a moon of training.
Poolpelt wished he didn't have to show off his battle skills in the camp quite so much.

"Teach me a battle move!" Featherkit begged her daily.
"You're not old enough," she would tell her.
She was going to make sure she made it to a warrior without any serious injuries.
She owed it to her and Feathershine.

"Throw it again! Throw it again!" Splashkit came bouncing back, the

moss ball jiggling from her jaws.
She dropped it at Poolpelt's paws and looked up pleadingly. "Please."
Poolpelt scooped it up and dangled it from a claw, her whiskers twitching as she watched the kits stare intently at the jerking clump of moss.
Then she tossed it to the other side of the snowy clearing and the kits hared away, kicking up snow.

"Poolpelt?" Icestar was padding toward her. "I want you to find Blackfrost and Shadowpaw in the cold hollow." She glanced at the sun, rising high in the milky blue sky.
Poolpelt cocked her head. "Why?"
Icestar looked solemn. "I've been getting reports of kittypets crossing the border, and I want you go with them to investigate."

Poolpelt knew exactly who'd made the reports.
Blackfrost had been spoiling for a fight with kittypets for moons. Even more so since he'd become Shadowpaw's mentor, as if he wanted to make sure Shadowpaw understood that kittypets were their enemies.

Poolpelt dipped her head to the IceClan leader and headed toward the camp entrance.
Featherkit pounded after her. "Where are you going?"
"Just to check the border," she explained.
"Is DawnClan invading again? Or SmokeClan?" Featherkit reared onto his hind legs and swiped at the air.
Poolpelt wondered whether he had learned that battle move from Shadowpaw.

"Just some kittypets sniffing around."
"Are you going to shred them to pieces?"
"They're just kittypets," Poolpelt told her. "A hiss should be enough to send them running."

Featherkit sighed. "I wish I could come with you."
"Another few moons and you will," Poolpelt promised. "Now run back and play with your denmates so Ashfall and Swiftfur can rest."
Featherkit charged away, and Poolpelt headed for the cold hollow.

"Now lunge at me," Blackfrost commanded.
Poolpelt could see the pair through the frozen bushes just ahead of her.

Baring his teeth, Shadowpaw rushed at Blackfrost, slamming into his flank.
Blackfrost turned and flung his apprentice away with a hefty blow that left Shadowpaw staggering.
"Frost-brain!" Blackfrost growled. "You should have seen that coming."
Shadowpaw shook his head, looking dazed. "Let me try it again," he begged.

Poolpelt hurried forward to interrupt.
She couldn't watch such brutal training.
She was sure Duskwing had no idea that Shadowpaw's mentor was so rough with her kit.
Should she warn the IceClan leader what was going on?

She shivered, thankful that Blackfrost wouldn't be able to train Featherkit.

"Blackfrost!" she called before Shadowpaw could take another lunge at his mentor.
Both cats swung around, their eyes narrowing when they saw her.
"What is it?" Blackfrost demanded.

"Icestar wants us to check the border for kittypets," she told him.
His dark gaze brightened. "At last!" He bounded into the snowy trees. "Come on, Shadowpaw," he called over his shoulder. "Let's try out some of those battle moves for real."
Paws heavy, Poolpelt followed.

As they neared Twolegplace, Blackfrost signaled to Shadowpaw.
"Run up ahead and check for scents," he ordered.
Shadowpaw rushed off, leaving Blackfrost and Poolpelt alone.

"I know what you're doing," Blackfrost growled.
Poolpelt was alarmed by the ferocity of his mew. "What?"
"Playing with Featherkit every time my tail's turned."

"She's my *kin!*" She meowed in horror.

"She's my *kit!*" He retorted. "Just remember that! I can stop your dumb games anytime I want."
"How?" Poolpelt glared at him, trying to hide her fear.
Blackfrost flashed her a menacing look. "Right now, I'm letting you play with her. But the moment I think you're turning her soft, the games will stop, get it?"
He went on, "She's my daughter, not yours!"
Stung, Poolpelt opened her mouth to tell him exactly what she thought about kit-rearing methods.

"Kittypet scent!" Shadowpaw came tearing back. "Come on!"
The young tom led them to a sparse stip of snowy woodland not far from a row of bright red Twoleg nests.
Light filtered through the snow-filled branches, striping the snowy floor.
Shadowpaw started sniffing the snow. "The trail leads this way."

Poolpelt could smell a faint trace of kittypet. Not strong enough to be a full-grown cat. "It's just a kit," she meowed. "Not worth following."
"I forgot you had a soft spot for kittypets," Blackfrost growled.
He followed his apprentice along the scent trail as it led through the biggest snow at the edge of Twolegplace.

They pushed through the snow and emerged in a cold patch of frozen scrub beside a fence.
A black-and-white kit was snuffling the snow.
As the three Clan cats advanced, he spun around, eyes wide.

"Hello." He blinked happily, tail high.
Shadowpaw bristled, and Blackfrost had already unsheathed his claws.
Poolpelt tensed, willing the tom to run. The fence wasn't far. There was a chance it might escape.

A growl rumbled in Blackfrost's throat. "What are you doing here? This is IceClan territory!"

"Blackfrost, he's only a kit. He's no threat," Poolpelt pleaded.

"An intruder is an intruder, Poolpelt! You've always been too soft on them."

Poolpelt felt sick as Blackfrost turned to his apprentice. "Here, let's put it to my apprentice. What do you think, Shadowpaw? How should we handle this?"
"I think the kittypet should be taught a lesson," Shadowpaw hissed. "One it'll remember."

Poolpelt stepped forward. "Now, hold on, there's no need for this —!"
Blackfrost turned on her, arching his back. "*Shut up!*"

Shadowpaw lunged at the kit, sending it flying like piece of prey.
The kit skidded across the soft snow and landed, gasping for breath.
Get up!

Tail bushed in terror, the kit tried to scramble to its paws. But Shadowpaw pounced again.
The white apprentice pinned the kit to the snow.
With claws unsheathed, he swiped at its muzzle, then raked its flank.
The kit squealed in agony.

"Show it your teeth, Shadowpaw," Blackfrost goaded.
Shadowpaw sunk his teeth into the kit's shoulder and hauled it to its paws.
The kit yowled and struggled, its paws scrabbling helplessly on the snow until Shadowpaw, his eyes gleaming, flung him away.

No!

Blood welling scarlet along his wounds, the kit pressed his belly to the snow as though he wished he could just vanish.
Shadowpaw padded grimly toward it.

"No!" Poolpelt pelted past him and stood in front of the kit and glared at Shadowpaw with the all the power of ThunderClan running through her veins. "Stop. Shadowpaw."
Shadowpaw halted and glared at her. "I was just defending our territory!"

"You don't need to hurt them though!" She reasoned. "They've learned their lesson. Leave them alone. NOW."
She bared her teeth, ready to fight.

The kit stood up on shaking paws and gazed at Shadowpaw with terror in its eyes.
"Yeah," Shadowpaw agreed. He leered at the kit. "You'll never forget me!"

Poolpelt held her ground while the kit fled. "If I *ever* see you do something like that again—!" Her eyes flashed from mentor to apprentice— "I'll report you to Icestar!"

She then glared coldy at Shadowpaw. "What is wrong with you!?"
Shadowpaw snorted as he rolled his eyes.

"We were only defending IceClan territory from invaders," Blackfrost snarled.
"That so-called invader was a *kit!*"
He turned and stalked away between the snowy trees, his black pelt swallowed in the distance.
Shadowpaw trotted after him with his tail up, proud of his brave victory.

Rage and horror throbbed in Poolpelt's black paws as she stared after them.
What has ever happened to you, Blackfrost?

Chapter 34

MANY MOONS LATER...

"Featherpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend your Clan, even at the cost of your life?"
Featherpaw dipped her head. "I do."
Icestar purred. "Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior name. Featherpaw, from this moment you will be known as Featherfall. StarClan honors your loyalty and courage, and we welcome you as a full warrior of IceClan."
As Icestar pressed her muzzle to the pale white tabby's head, the Clan broke into cheers. "Featherfall! Featherfall!"

Poolpelt closed her eyes, relief washing over her like rain.
I kept my promise, Feathershine. I kept her safe.

Poolpelt hadn't been Featherfall's mentor after all.
Icestar had told her that she didn't think kin were the best mentors for kin, espectually as Poolpelt had badically mothered Featherfall since Feathershine's death.

Speckledall had trained Featherfall, a choice Poolpelt approved of. Featherfall had trained alongside Shadowfoot, and Poolpelt was pleased to have a wise and sweet mentor around to temper Blackfrost's brutal practices.
She had involved herself whenever she could in Featherfall's training, which hadn't been easy with Blackfrost glowering at her whenever she tried to guide the young she-cat.

She opened her eyes, basking in the warmth of the cheers that welcomed Featherfall to the Clan.
She had grown strong and beautiful, and she stood now with her chin high and her eyes bright, thick pale white tabby fur dazzling in the leaf-fall sun.

It had rained in the night, and the snowy forest sparkled with silvery snow, reflecting rainbows through the snowy trees.

Many moons had passed since Poolpelt had promised her sister in her dream of the gorge that she'd help raise the young she-cat, moons that had brought change to the whole Clan.

Dovepaw, Berrypaw, Robinpaw, Riverpaw, and Splashpaw had moved to the apprentices's den, though Lakekit had to stay in the nursery a bit more because of a fall from a tree.

Dovepaw had gotten Bluefeather, Robinpaw had gotten Hawkflame, Riverpaw had gotten Crowclaw, and Splashpaw was apprenticed to Poolpelt herself.

She glanced at the sky, remembering when Splashpaw's apprentice ceremony was over..

Splashpaw bounced circles around Poolpelt. "Eee! I'm so excited you're my mentor!"

Poolpelt purred in amusement. "Shall we start training?"
Splashpaw stopped in her tracks, and smiled at Poolpelt with eyes full of excitement. "REALLY!? What we gonna do? Are we gonna see the territory? See the borders? Hunt for the Clan? Practice battle moves? Chase out DawnClan cats? Do a border patrol? See if any of the Clans are invading?"

Poolpelt put her paw on her apprentice's head. "HOLY HECK—If you don't calm your butt down this second, I'm not taking you training at all!"

Poolpelt let out a amused snort of the trouble Splashpaw has caused so far.. Running off without her, causing border scuffles with DawnClan SO. MANY. TIMES— she should probably make a list of how many times she's apologized to the DawnClan patrols.

Stormclaw, Swiftwing and Darkcloud had died peacefully, and were still missed by their Clanmates.
Bladewing has also joined the Elders's den, as well as Speckledall.

Snowheart had moved into the nursery, expecting her first kits. She was anxious about raising a litter through leaf-bare, bu the Clan

was strong and hopeful, and Poolpelt knew that they would protect the kits however harsh the season.

Blackfrost had established himself as a senior warrior, taking a nest near the center of the warriors's den.
Shadowfoot had been a warrior for four moons and had already claimed a nest close fo Blackfrost's, she was surprised Shadowfoot would want to still be next to Blackfrost, as he is the one who gave Shadowfoot that awful shoulder scar.
No warrior had challenged him, though Poolpelt had wondered if it was because his denmates respect the fierce, white, black-pawed tom and his mentor.

Blackfrost had become like a father to the white tom in Darkcloud's absence; he had trained him to win at any cost, defending his methods as part of the warrior code, though Poolpelt saw no honor in the way Blackfrost fought for his Clan.

Shadowfoot watched Featherfall now; the new warrior's eyes glittered as she padded over to Poolpelt and dipped her head to her.

"Thank you." The pale white tabby she-cat's mew had grown gentle but with a fierce edge to it. "You have given me so much."
Poolpelt's heart swelled. *I won't let anything hurt you, ever.*

"Your mother would be proud of you," Poolpelt murmured, her mew catching in her throat.
"I know," Featherfall purred. "She'd be proud of you, too."

"Featherfall!" Thornwing and Amberleaf were calling for her.
Featherfall pressed her muzzle to Poolpelt's cheek and hurried away.

Bladewing! Poolpelt remembered that she'd promised to tell the old tom about the naming ceremony.
He had been too frail to leave his nest.
Padding to the fresh-kill pile, she picked a juicy mouse from the top and padded into the Elders's den.

Bladewing had curled in his nest with his nose on his paws and his eyes closed.

Not wanting to wake him, Poolpelt laid the mouse beside his nest and began to creep out of the stone den.

Bladewing lifted his head. "Did it go well?"
Poolpelt turned. "Wonderfully. Featherfall is a warrior now."
"A good name for a strong warrior," Bladewing commented.

He sniffed at the mouse and sat up, stretching. "You'll miss her."
"What?" Pooloelt was unnerved by the solemn look in the old tom's eyes.
"Featherfall."
"She's not going anywhere. In fact she'll be closer now that we'll be sharing the same den."
"But she won't need you as much."

Poolpelt felt a pang. It was true. "I still have Splashpaw to train," she pointed out.
"Training an apprentice is not the same as raising a kit."

Poolpelt blinked as Bladewing went on. "You gave up everything for Feathershine's kit. Look around you: Your Clanmates have mates, kits—lives of their own, beyond being a mentor."

"There's nothing more important than training warriors!" Poolpelt protested.
Bladewing gazed at her. "Really?"
Poolpelt shifted her black paws.

"You've fulfilled your promise to Feathershine," Bladewing mewed softly. "You need to live your own life now, Poolpelt, before you wake up and realize that you're as empty as a beech husk."
Is that how the old tom really saw life? Surely there were things to offer the Clan other than kits!

Poolpelt was proud of what she'd done for Featherfall, what she was doing with Splashpaw. Her apprentice was going to make a fine warrior.
My life isn't empty! She started to back out of the den.

Bladewing prodded the mouse, and, without looking up, rasped, "Maybe Braveheart has waited long enough."

Poolpelt scooted from the den without replying. Was Bladewing telling her to take Braveheart as a mate? *He doesn't have the right to order around my love life!*

"Poolpelt!" Rainpelt was calling her from beneath Highrock. "You can join Thornwing's hunting patrol."

Thornwing and Springleaf were pacing the snowy clearing, while Braveheart sat nearby, swifting the snow with his paw.

Poolpelt nodded to Rainpelt.
The IceClan deputy was growing thin again, her eyes tired.
The sickness that had dogged her last leaf-bare seemed to be returning.
The Clan cats might need a new deputy sooner than they thought.
And if that happens, I need to be ready. It's for the sake of the Clan!

"Ready?" Thornwing was staring at her, his pale blue eyes bright.
Poolpelt nodded and followed the golden-brown warrior as he led Springleaf and Braveheart out of the camp.

They headed for the river, the snowy ferns draped themselves over Poolpelt's pelt.

"We should split up." Thornwing halted and looked over his patrol. "We'll have more chance of picking up scents if we cover a wider area."
Poolpelt nodded.

As her Clanmates headed in different directions, she chose a path through the frozen undergrowth.
Soft snow crunched in her claws as she picked up the scent of a squirrel.
With her heart quickening, she followed the trail, pulling up when Braveheart's scent tainted the snowy bushes.
She didn't want to steal his prey, so she doubled back, heading closer to the river.

Something hopped in the fluffy snow.
Prickling her ears, Poolpelt dropped into a crouch.
A small moorhen was flitting low along the snow, stopping to peck

at hidden seeds buried deep in the snow.
Water seeped up and soaked her belly as Poolpelt crept forward.
The bird hadn't seen her.

Poolpelt sprang and grasped it with unsheathed claws.
It fluttered for a moment in her black paws, but fell still as she nipped it's neck.
It would make a tasty treat for Snowheart.

"Good catch!"
A deep mew made her jump.
Someone had called from the other side of the river.
She spun around, the moorhen dangling from her jaws.
Goldenfur!

The DawnClan tom was watching her from the far shore.

Poolpelt dropped her catch and narrowed her eyes at him. "Are you spying on me?"
"No." Goldenfur looked mildly amused. "I'm allowed to patrol my own territory, you know."

Thornwing's call sounded from farther up the bank. "Poolpelt!"

"I have to go," she told Goldenfur.
He stared at her, his sun-like gaze unwavering. "Okay."

She headed away with her prey, reluctant to leave.
Walking away from the DawnClan tom left a hard, hollow feeling in her belly.
He's DawnClan, she reminded herself sharply.

Her Clanmates were waiting, each with prey.
"Were you talking to someone?" Thornwing asked her.
Poolpelt dropped her catch. "Just to myself," she meowed quickly.

Braveheart glanced admirably at the moorhen. "Nice catch," he purred.
"Thanks." Poolpelt didn't meet his gaze.

Somehow the IceClan warrior's praise didn't spark the same thrill in as Goldenfur's had done.

Chapter 35

"We need to take back Icerocks!"
Icestar's announcement from Highrock was greeted with cheers from her Clanmates below the Highrock.

"About time, too!" Briarfang called.
"They've ruled those rocks for too long," Hawkflame agreed.

Shadowfoot raked the snow his powerful, sharp claws, his eyes fired with excitement.
He's more interested in the battle than in winning Icerocks, Poolpelt guessed.

A light drizzle had fallen steadily since she'd returned with her moorhen, she looked up and listened to Icestar.

"Leafbare is coming, and we have more warriors to feed. With kits on the way, too, we'll need as much territory as possible to hunt."

Snowheart was watching from outside the nursery. Her mate, Ravenbird, lifted his muzzle. "When will we fight?"
Icestar shook her head. "I want to take Icerocks without a battle," she meowed.

Blackfrost stared at the Clan leader as if she'd grown an extra head. "What?"
"We can beat them easily," Shadowfoot growled.
Bluefeather put her head to one side. "How do we take Icerocks without a battle?"
Darkcloud lashed his tail. "DawnClan won't just give it up because we ask."

"They might," Icestar suggested.
Blackfrost bristled. "You're going to *ask* for Icerocks back?"

Shadowfoot curled his lip. "Or are you going to *beg?*"
Icestar glared at the white warrior. "IceClan never begs!" She unsheathed her claws.
Shadowfoot lowered his gaze.

"Why risk a battle we don't need to fight?" Icestar yowled. "IceClan is strong. We have some of the most skilled warriors in the forest." She gazed around the Clan, her gaze lingering on Shadowfoot and then Featherfall. "The other Clans know that. Do you think DawnClan will really want to fight over territory they don't need? They use the rocks for basking in the sun, not for hunting prey. We will show them our warriors and persuade them that giving up Icerocks would be a wise decision for both Clans."

Hawkflame's eyes lit with interest. "You mean take a patrol to their camp?" he guessed.
Icestar nodded. "We'll tell them that we own Icerocks, and that we'll shred any DawnClan cat who dares set paw on it again."

Springleaf blinked. "March into their camp and tell them that? It'll be suicide."
Shadowfoot growled, "Not if we send a strong enough patrol."

Shadowfoot's amber eyes narrowed. "We go in peace but threaten war if they don't cooperate." He clearly approved of this plan.
Poolpelt pictured fearfully of the broad-shouldered warrior standing in DawnClan's camp; suddenly the nursery and the elders's den would seem vulnerable.
DawnClan would be likely to agree to anything.

"Then we're agreed?" Icestar glanced around the Clan.
Briarfang nodded. "It sounds like a good plan."

"When words gets out that DawnClan gave up Icerocks without a fight, the other Clans will fear us all the more," Blackfrost added.
Poolpelt's tail flicked. She wasn't so sure.

Icestar had come up with a way of avoiding battle. That showed good leadership.
But to threaten DawnClan in their camp? Elders and kits lived there.

Hadn't they learned the attack on DawnClan that camps were no place for a battle?

She shook the thought away.
Icestar would never let innocent cats be threatened.

She glanced at Blackfrost.
He might.

"Then it's settled," Icestar decided. "I'll lead the patrol. Owlpaw, Rainpelt, Thornwing, Featherfall, Braveheart, Briarfang, Hawkflame and Poolpelt. You will come with me."

Blackfrost blinked. "Not me?"
"You stay and guard the camp with Shadowfoot," Icestar told him. "With so many warriors out of camp, we'll need to leave behind a strong patrol."
Poolpelt felt a glimmer of satisfaction.
Without Blackfrost's menacing presence, IceClan's position would be more likely to appear simple and fair.

The sun was out as the patrol wet out.
She pushed through the frozen undergrowth after her Clanmates.

When they emerged from the snowy forest and skirted Icerocks, following the riverbank to the stepping-stones, a cold wind swirled around them.
Poolpelt shivered as it tugged her fur, and the thought of crossing the river in DawnClan made her even colder.
Icestar led the way across the stepping-stones.
Poolpelt stiffened when she saw one of the small flat stones wobble beneath her paws.

Owlpaw and Thornwing followed, hopping nimbly over the stones.
Poolpelt stood back to let the others push past her.
Then she was alone on the snowy shore with Braveheart.
"You can go first," he offered.

Poolpelt stared at the line of stones and the dark water swirling around them.
She padded forward on shaking black paws.

Flowertail's prophecy rang in her ears as she paused at the water's edge: *Even the most powerful blazes can be destroyed by sun and teeth. The sun is here, could it destroy me?*

"Go on," Braveheart urged.
"Wait!" Poolpelt's black paws felt like lumps of snow.
"We have to stay with the patrol," Braveheart warned.

Poolpelt pushed herself forward, springing onto the first stone.
Water splashed and gurgled around her.
The blood roared in her ears.

She leaped to the next stone, swaying for a heart-stopping moment before she found her balance and gathered her haunches to jump again.
Stupid prophecy!
And again.

The final stone wobbled as she landed, and water washed over her black paws
Don't let me drown or evaporate!

She flung herself to the shore, panting.
Braveheart landed beside her a moment later. "That was easy," he chirped. "I don't know why DawnClan cats bother swimming."
Poolpelt marched away into the trees.

The patrol had halted.
As Poolpelt caught up, she saw that DawnClan warriors were blocking their path, hackles up.
They were broad-shouldered and powerful.

Poolpelt recognized Pineclaw at the patrol.
He and Blackfrost should have a tea party.

Pineclaw unsheathed his claws. "What are you doing on DawnClan territory?"

"We want to talk with Sparrowstar," Icestar told him.
Sparkshine leaned forward, her eyes blazing. "About what?"
Icestar narrowed her eyes. "You ask me to share words meant for

your leader?"
Sparkshine snarled.

Pineclaw waved the warrior back with his tail. "You expect me to lead you straight into our camp?" he countered. "We haven't forgotten what you did to us."

"Do we look like a battle patrol?" Icestar challenged.
Poolpelt leaned close to Featherfall, whose pelt was pricking. "Keep your fur flat," she whispered, "or you'll spook them."

Pineclaw ran his gaze over the patrol and shook his head. "It would take more than this to overrun our camp," he conceded.
"We wish only to share words," Icestar pressed.
Pineclaw nodded, eyes like flints. "Follow." He turned and headed away through the trees.

Poolpelt didn't like the lush, warm, wavy, grass scuffling beneath her black paws, or how there was not a sign of any snow as they left the border of DawnClan and headed deeper into DawnClan territory.
The route took them through a maze of trees.

Pineclaw halted and dove down into a gorse tunnel and the other patrol followed.
Poolpelt bit back a gasp of realization. *It's just like the stone tunnel!*

The IceClan patrol looked confused for a few seconds then padded forward into the gorse tunnel and came out.
Poolpelt's eyes widened in shock.

It was *beautiful...*
The clearing was edged with thick grass, dotted with tree stumps, and had a thick curtain of ferns and gorse shielding it.
It was also surrounded by brambles, oddly.

She glanced on the right, and saw a tall boulder which had scuffed earth around its base.
That must be the Highrock, Poolpelt thought.
A vast, sandy clearing stretched to the Highrock, which is near a clump of nettles.

She looked on the edge of the clearing and saw kits under a thick bramble bush, she glanced on the other side of the nursery and saw apprentices play-fighting and saw the apprentices's den was in a clump of ferns.
And she finally saw the warriors's den, which was under a bush with a nearby nettle patch.

She looked over at a tree where the fresh-kill pile was and saw Sunspots eating.
When Sunspots noticed Poolpelt, she waved to her happily.
Anger pulsed in her as she remembered what Sunspots had done, *multiple times* and will never stop.
She gave a glare at Sunspots and padded along with her Clanmates.

"Why do they live in such uncomfortable-looking dens?" Thornwing murmured.
Poolpelt silently agreed. Why are there no stone dens?

"They're comfortable for *DawnClan cats*," Pineclaw snapped, overhearing him. "Wait here."
He left the IceClan cats and went inside a den inside the Highrock, with lichen hanging over the entrance.

"Emberpelt! Look!" A ginger tabby kit yelped over its shoulder, and a flame-colored tabby she-cat slid out of the den behind her.
The queen looked at the visitors in dismay until Sparkshine reassured her.
"They say they're here to talk to Sparrowstar." Sparkshine then padded forward and murmured toward Foxflight.
Emberpelt nodded and wrapped her tail around her kit, staying outside to watch.

Two of DawnClan's senior warriors, Foxflight and Sparkshine, prowled around the clearing, their eyes wary and their hackles up.

Pineclaw reappeared with Sparrowstar following.
The DawnClan leader was round-eyed, his gaze curious.
He did not speak but simply stared at Icestar, waiting for the IceClan leader to speak.

Icestar dipped her head. "Icerocks belong to IceClan," she declared.

"We are taking them back."

Sparrowstar unsheathed his claws. "You'll have to fight for them," he growled.
"We will if we have to," Icestar meowed. "But we thought we'd give you a fair warning."

Foxflignt padded forward, pelt bristling. "Are you threatening us in our own camp?" She glanced at her Clanmates.
Poolpelt's belly tightened.
They were surrounded by DawnClan warriors.
What if they decided to fight for Icerocks right then and there?

"We're not threatening you," Icestar answered calmly. "We're giving you a choice. If you keep off Icerocks, we'll leave you alone. But any cat who sets paw there will be shredded."

Sparrowstar stepped forward. "Do you really think we will give up the rocks so easily?"
"If you prefer a battle, then we'll fight," Icestar meowed.

"But are the rocks worth it?" She tipped her head to one side. "You have all of DawnClan territory to hunt, your pelts are too clearly marked to stalk prey there. It is no use for hunting. So is it worth fighting for?"
The IceClan leader made her proposition seem so reasonable, Poolpelt waited for Sparrowstar to agree.

But the DawnClan leader just stared, opening her mouth to scent the air. "I smell fear," he snarled.
"Then it comes from your own warriors," Icestar countered.

"You actually expect us to give up Icerocks?" Sparrowstar hissed.
Icestar shook her head. "I expect you to fight for them," she meowed. "Even though you will waste warriors and blood. You will lose, and it will be thanks to you decision."

Sparrowstar took a step toward the IceClan leader. "DawnClan warriors fight with claws, not words."

"Very well." Icestar nodded. "Icerocks are ours. We will set the new

markers tomorrow. After that, any DawnClan cat found there will face a fight that he will not win."
She gazed around the camp and raised her voice. "Let all DawnClan know that the warning has been given. Any blood spilled now will be on Sparrowstar's paws." She turned and headed for the entrance.

"Is that it?" Braveheart whispered.
"I think that was plenty!"
Poolpelt was impressed by her leader's strategy.
She'd openly dared DawnClan to fight, yet made it look like their choice.
Now all they could do was wait see how DawnClan reacted when they set the new markers.
Would IceClan find an ambush waiting, or would DawnClan decide it wasn't a battle worth fighting?

DawnClan growls followed them as they climbed up the gorse tunnel.

Then paws pounded from the gorse tunnel.
Had DawnClan decided to fight after all?
The IceClan patrol spun around, ready to defend themselves.

Sparkshine faced them, with Foxflight and Stormclaw behind her.
"We'll escort you to the border," she growled.
"Thank you." Icestar dipped her head.
"We're only making sure you go back to your own territory," Stormclaw spat.

Poolpelt's pelt suddenly pricked.
Someone was watching her.
She turned to see Goldenfur padding from a bush with a squirrel caught in his jaws.

He dropped it and stared at the cats. "What's going on?"
"IceClan has been making threats," Stormclaw growled.
Goldenfur's gaze met Poolpelt's, alarmed. "Is there going to be a battle?"
Icestar flicked her tail. "We were trying to avoid one."

Stormclaw stepped forward. "Go home," he advised darkly.

"Very well." Icestar nodded and headed away through the bushes.

Goldenfur tagged onto their escort and Poolpelt was acutely aware of him—his scent, the sound of his paw steps—as he followed them along the twisting path to the stepping-stones.

When Stormclaw quickened his pace to take the lead, Goldenfur fell in beside Poolpelt.
"I must talk to you," he hissed in her ear. "Make an excuse." He dropped back with a flick of his golden tail.
Poolpelt twitched her ears.
The urgency in Goldenfur's voice nagged her.
She had to know what he wanted.

"Ow!" She started to limp.
Braveheart whipped his head around. "Are you okay?"
"Thorn in my paw," Poolpelt complained. "I need to get it out."
"I'll help," Braveheart offered.

Goldenfur growled. "You keep with the others. I'll help her." There was jealousy in his mew.
He glared at Braveheart, who hesitated for a heartbeat before backing away.
"Don't be long," he called to Poolpelt. "Or I'll come back for you."
"I'll only be a moment," Poolpelt promised.

As soon as her Clanmates had disappeared around the corner with their DawnClan escort, Goldenfur faced her. "Thanks," he breathed. "We need to talk."
"Do we?" Poolpelt was mystified.
She shook her head, as though shaking would clear it.
There was something about Goldenfur's presence that made her feel dazed and fuzzy-headed.

"I haven't seen you in moons!" Goldenfur exclaimed.
Poolpelt tipped her head to one side. "Why should you? We live in different Clans."

Goldenfur shifted his paws, looking uncharacteristically awkward. "I can't stop thinking about you," he blurted out. "Ever since last leaf-bare when we talked near the river."

Poolpelt backed away. "But that was ages ago! And you don't even know me!"

"I *want* to know you," he insisted. "Everything about you—your favorite fresh-kill, your earliest memory, what you dream of..."

Poolpelt's heart twisted.
"You can't!" She gasped. "The warrior code!"
Is Goldenfur becoming just like Sunspots?

Goldenfur impatiently shook his head. "This isn't about the code. This is about us. Meet me tomorrow at moonhigh at Fourtrees."
Poolpelt felt her heart leap in her throat. Goldenfur was NOTHING like Sunspots at all!
Sunspots breaks the warrior code for sport, but Goldenfur is planning to do it for *love.*

"I can't!" Poolpelt protested.
"Just meet me," Goldenfur begged. "Give me a chance!" His sun-like eyes were round and pleading.

"Poolpelt?" Braveheart appeared around the corner with Sparkshine. "Are you leaving our territory or not?" growled the fiery tabby she-cat.
"Yes," Poolpelt croaked. She hurried to join Braveheart.

He bent down and touched her ear with his muzzle. "Are you okay?"
Poolpelt stiffened. She realized that she would soon make her choice of who her heart belonged to.
"Your paw?" Braveheart prompted. "The thorn?"
"Oh! Oh, yes," Poolpelt mewed. "I got it out. It's fine."

As she crossed the stepping-stones, she felt sure Goldenfur was watching her.

Chapter 36

Give me a chance!
Poolpelt woke with a start. Goldenfur's gaze was burned in her memory.
A chance for what?
She didn't need to ask.
She *knew*.

The intensity in his mew, the desperation in his eyes.
Seeing his longing was like looking at a reflection of her heart.
She felt the same tug.
The same longing to be closer.

But how could they be together?
They were from different Clans!
They shouldn't feel this way.

Groggily Poolpelt floundered out of her nest and stumbled from the den and padded down.
The clouds had cleared, leaving behind a pale leaf-fall sky.
Dawn was breaking over the camp, sending yellow light spilling across the snowy clearing.
Cold air nipped Poolpelt's nose and her black paws.

Shadowfoot pushed past her, heading for Highrock where Rainpelt was organizing the day's duties. "Are you coming, Poolpelt?" The white warrior called over his shoulder.

Thornwing and Featherfall were already watching in the shadow of the rock.
Bladewing watched from the Elders's den, as though he still missed his life as a warrior, though it had ended many seasons ago.
Briarpool and Briarfang shared fresh-kill nearby, while Bluefeather and Hawkflame paced restlessly, their pelts fluffed against the chill.
Their apprentices, Dovepaw and Robinpaw, practiced battle moves

at the edge of the snowy clearing.

"Hi, Poolpelt!" Splashpaw bounced out of the apprentices's den. "What are we doing today?"
Poolpelt hadn't planned the day's training yet. Her thoughts had been filled with Goldenfur. "Hunting." She meowed, saying the first thing that came into her head.
"Okay." Splashpaw was satisfied.

"We must increase our hunting patrols," Rainpelt announced. "Cold weather will mean hunger, and we'll face it better if we feed well now."

Shadowfoot's tail whisked across the snow. "When do we set the new border markers around Icerocks?"
"Icestar plans to send a battle patrol at dusk," Rainpelt told him.

"I want to be part of it," Shadowfoot declared.
"You will be," Rainpelt promised. "But StarClan willing, there'll be no need to fight."
Shadowfoot didn't answer, just sank his claws into the soft snow.

Poolpelt's heart quickened. What if she met Goldenfur in battle? How could she fight him now?

"Poolpelt?" Rainpelt was staring at her. "I hear you got a thorn in your pad yesterday. You'd better stay in camp today and let it heal."
Guilt shot through her. "It's much better today."
"We don't want it getting infected," Rainpelt reasoned. ""You can help out in the nursery instead."

"But I promised Splashpaw I'd take her hunting."
Hawkflame sat up from his meal. "I'm taking Robinpaw to the cold hollow. Splashpaw can come with us," he offered. "They can practice battle moves."
"Thanks." Poolpelt stared at her black paws, her ears hot, wishing that she really had stepped on a thorn.
She lifted her head and watched ruefully as her apprentice followed Hawkflame out of camp.
She was telling lies already, and she hadn't even met with Goldenfur yet.

"Can I give you some ointment for that paw?" Flowertail took her by surprise.
"N-no, thanks." Poolpelt tucked her supposedly injured black paw quickly behind the other, hoping she wouldn't ask to examine it.
"Not sore?"
Poolpelt shook her head. "It must have just been a sharp bit of grass or something," she rambled. "Just a scratch, really."

Flowertail flicked her tail. "It just shows," she mewed. "Cats should stick to their own territory."
Did she know she was lying? Poolpelt searched the medicine cat's gaze. Perhaps StarClan had told her something.
"Well, keep it clean and if it does start to throb, come and get something from the medicine den." Flowertail padded toward the nursery.
If StarClan didn't want her to meet Goldenfur, surely they would have said something to Flowertail, something that would make her stop her?
Maybe StarClan wanted this to happen.
Maybe it was her destiny.

"I hate being left behind." Snowheart sighed.
Poolpelt lifted her chin off her paws. "They'll be back soon," she soothed.

She was supposed to keep Snowheart company while the battle patrol set the new border at Icerocks.
But her thoughts were busy with Goldenfur.
What would he say? What would *she* say?
What if she did something frost-brained, like trip over her own tail?

She stared at the dew sparkling the snowy clearing.
The moon was rising.

"Do you think they fought?" The white queen glanced anxiously at Poolpelt.
Poolpelt pricked her ears, listening for battle yowls.
Would the noise reach this far?
Which cats would Sparrowstar choose to defend the rocks?

Stones clattered in the ravine.
Poolpelt sat up, her heart racing.
"Did you win?" she called to Icestar as she led the patrol into camp.
"The frost-hearts didn't show up!" Blackfrost crowed.

Hawkflame followed. "They hadn't even renewed their markers."
Poolpelt felt relief washing over her pelt.
Goldenfur was safe.

Icestar gazed around her Clan. "From now on, no Clan will dare threaten our borders."

Snowheart purred as Crowclaw padded over and pressed his muzzle to hers. "There will be plenty of fresh-kill for our kits this leaf-bare," Crowclaw murmured.

Poolpelt got to her black paws.
What was the mood in the DawnClan camp?
Bleak enough for Goldenfur to change his mind about meeting a IceClan cat?
She would still go to Fourtrees.
If he felt half as restless and distracted as she did, he'd be there.

"Let's celebrate!" Rainpelt stood at the fresh-kill pile and began tossing to her Clanmates.
Poolpelt narrowed her eyes. Why couldn't they just go to their dens and sleep? Her claws itched with frustration.
By the time she sneaked out, Goldenfur might think she wasn't coming.

What if he went home?
Was she really going to slip out of camp and meet the DawnClan warrior?

Featherfall tossed a sparrow at her black paws. "Join us!" she called.
She was lying with Amberleaf and Thornwing, already making a hearty meal of a plump squirrel.
Poolpelt shrugged.
She didn't have any appetite—in fact, she couldn't imagine ever being hungry again—but she didn't want her Clanmates to start asking awkward questions or send her back to Flowertail.

She padded over to Featherfall and forced herself to take a mouthful of the sparrow. It tasted like splintered wood.

Her heart thudded and skittered as she willed her Clanmates to their nests.

Only when the moon hung high overhead did they begin to head for their dens.
Poolpelt stretched, pretending to yawn.
She'd never felt less tired, but she padded into the warriors's den, declaring to every cat within earshot how much she was looking forward to a good night's sleep.

The den was dark, despite the swollen moon.
Poolpelt tripped over Springleaf as she picked her way to her nest.
"Sorry," she hissed when Springleaf grunted.

She curled down in the moss, eyes wide, as her denmates settled around her.
None of them seemed willing to end the celebrations.

"I thought they'd fight for Icerocks," Thornwing admitted.
"They might fight yet," Blackfrost growled. "New markers or not."
Were they going to talk about those wretched stones till dawn?

"Are you okay?" Amberleaf nudged Poolpelt's nest. "You keep fidgeting."
"I'm fine." Poolpelt answered quickly.
"I'm sorry you didn't get to go to Icerocks," Amberleaf sympathized. "But you didn't miss much."
"I din't mind." Poolpelt closed her eyes.
Go to sleep! Go to sleep!
At last the den grew quiet. Gentle snores stirred the air.

Gingerly, Poolpelt got to her black paws. Glancing around the nests, she looked for eyes glinting in the darkness.
Nothing.
Every cat was asleep.
She padded silently around the edge of the den.

Something soft squashed beneath her black paw.

"Get off!" Ravenbird's sleepy mew made her jump.
She stared down at the tom sprawled in his nest.
She'd stepped on his tail.
"Sorry!"
He blinked, then rolled over and went back to sleep.
Poolpelt finally slipped out of the den.

She skirted the snowy clearing, keeping to the shadows.
No sign of life.

She crept toward the stone tunnel and crouched in the entrance.

She could hear Briarfang keeping watch outside, his pelt brushing the stone as he fidgeted.
She waited until she heard his paw steps pad away.
He must be patrolling the camp walls.

She waited a moment, then scooted through the stone tunnel and the second she reached out, she slipped into the frozen bushes on the other side.
No sign of Briarfang.

She darted out from the frozen leaves and clambered over a rock, slipping down behind it, her breath coming fast.

She couldn't believe what she was doing: betraying everything that had once been important to her.
She was a traitor, and not just to herself.
To her Clan.
To the warrior code.

Silently, swiftly, she raced along the ravine and bounded up the rocks, careful not to disturb any loose stones.
The moon lit her way as she scrambled over the top and sneaked into the snowy forest.

Snow turned to grass as she followed the trail used by the Clan to go to the Gathering, Poolpelt hurried through the snowy forest.
Poolpelt hurried through the forest.
Moonlight shone through the bare branches, making the forest floor glow.

Had he waited?

Her heart rose to her throat when she reached the edge of the hollow.
Below her, Fourtrees stood eerily silent, casting thick black shadows across the clearing.

If Poolpelt kept going, she would change the course of her life.
She knew it with such intensity that her black paws began to freeze.

For a moment she sensed the spirit of Feathershine.
Her sister's scent drifted in the air as birch-smooth fur wreathed around her pelt.
Feathershine was trying to tell her something.
What is it?

Frustration surged through Poolpelt's pelt.
Was Feathershine trying to stop her, or was she giving her blessing?

"I *have* to do this," Poolpelt whispered. "Please understand. It doesn't mean that I don't love you, or that I'm not loyal to my Clan."

She shook herself, letting the cold night air pierce her fur and chase away the scents of her sister.

Then she stepped over the crest and headed down the slope into the moon-bathed hollow.

Chapter 37

He waited!
Poolpelt's heart quickened as she saw Goldenfur silhouetted in the moonlight.
He sat gazing at the Great Rock, eyes shining.
Leaves crunched under Poolpelt's paws as she approached him, echoing across the hollow.

He whipped around. "You came!"
She could smell his scent now. She opened her mouth, but couldn't think of what to say.

"I thought maybe you weren't going to..." He seemed to run out of words and stared at her instead.
Such softness in his eyes.

"I couldn't get away," she whispered.
"But you did."
"Yes."
Silence.

Is that it?
Beneath their feet, the grass was sparkling with frost.
Were they going to stand here like frost-brains searching for words till their paws froze to the ground?
"It's too cold to stand around." Goldenfur echoed what she was thinking.

This is ridiculous.
She might not know what to say to the DawnClan warrior, but she knew the best way of warming up.

Poolpelt nodded toward the largest of the trees. "I'll race you to the top of that oak!" She raced away, then realized Goldenfur wasn't following.

She skidded to a halt and looked back at him. "What's wrong?"
Goldenfur was twitching the tip of his tail. "I.. haven't really practiced my tree climbing."
Poolpelt purred. "You're a cat, aren't you? Of course you can climb. Come on, I'll show you. Unless you're scared," she added mischievously.
"No way!" Goldenfur's eyes lit up.

He charged past her and balanced on one of the roots twisting out of the earth at the foot of the nearest oak tree. "What now?" He gazed up at the wide, gnarled trunk.
"Watch." Poolpelt jumped up with her claws stretched out, and gripped the bark with her front paws. She kept her hind claws sheathed so she could use her back paws to pull herself up.

"Old trees like this are easier," she called down over her shoulder. "The bark's thick and soft. Even a hefty cat like you should be able to claw his way up."
"Who are you calling hefty?" Goldenfur sprang after her.

His paws grabbed clumsily at the tree trunk, but strength and determination kept him hanging on, but he prepared but his next jump.
Poolpelt said nothing.
She wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of hearing he was doing better than she expected.
Taking a deep breath, she scooted upward, bounding onto a low branch.

Goldenfur scrambled up and collapsed next to her, panting. "Do you actually enjoy this?"
"Of course!" She waved her tail over the edge.

"Look." The clearing sparkled below them as if stars had fallen onto the ground.
Goldenfur gazed cautiously over the edge. "Not bad," he conceded.

"Ready for the next branch?"
"As soon as you are."

Poolpelt reached up to a knotty hole and used it to haul herself

higher before digging in her hind claws and leaping up onto the next jutting branch. "Can you manage?" she called down.
Goldenfur was hanging from the knot with his hind legs churning the air. "I'm absolutely fine," he muttered through clenched teeth.
He caught the bark with his claws and propelled himself upward so fast that Poolpelt had to jump along the branch to avoid getting knocked off.

"Very elegant," she teased.
"I'm glad you think so," he growled playfully. "But I'll get you back!"
"How?"
"Wait till I teach you to hunt in the sun."

Poolpelt stared at him, gripping the branch harder with her claws.
"No way," she told him, feeling her heart began to race.
Stop it! He doesn't know about the prophecy! He'll think you're just being a scaredy-mouse.
Goldenfur's whiskers twitched. "Scared of the sun?"
"Scared of heights?" She flashed him a challenging look and scrambled up to the next branch.

"You can't scare me," Goldenfur boasted, catching up to her and squeezing his bulky shape onto the slender strip of wood.
"Oh no?" She jumped to the next branch.
"No." He landed next to her.

"Okay, I'm impressed." Poolpelt leaned her head to one side. "Have you really never climbed before?"
"Never."
"Do you want to go higher?"
"Right to the top."

Poolpelt led him up through the tree, sending half-dead leaves showering down.
The Great Rock looked like a pebble by the time they'd reached the highest branch that would support their weight.
It dipped and bobbled when Poolpelt jumped onto it, and she let her body rock with the motion, allowing the branch to find its own balance.

Goldenfur sat down beside her, puffing, and stared at the ground far

below. "Wow."

Poolpelt gazed at the starry sky, open above them. "Do you think StarClan knows what we're doing?" The stars blurred as she felt Goldenfur's pelt brush against hers.
"If they can't see us up here, they can't see us anywhere," Goldenfur replied. He didn't seen in any hurry to move his pelt away.

Poolpelt tensed. So he thought StarClan was watching them right now?

Goldenfur turned to look at her. "Look at the clear sky," he meowed gently. "Don't you think StarClan would send clouds to cover the moon, or rain, if they disapproved of us meeting here?"
Yet again, he'd known exactly what she was thinking. "I guess so." Poolpelt hoped it was true.

A breeze made the tree tremble and their branch started to sway again. Goldenfur gasped and clung on tighter, which made it lurch more.

"Let's go down," Poolpelt suggested. "Just follow me."
She led him the easiest route she could find, glancing over her shoulder to check that he was okay.
He looked a lot less confident now.
He scrambled and slithered and branch to branch without speaking, and she saw relief flood his gaze as they landed back on the roots.

"Thank StarClan," he sighed, sliding down onto the ground and sinking his claws into the earth.

Poolpelt purred. "Not bad for a sun-face."
Goldenfur looked at her sharply. "What did you call me?"
Poolpelt met his gaze. "Sun-face."

He lunged for her, purring, but she quickly hopped quickly out of the way and hared toward the Great Rock.

"You wait till I get my paws on you!" Goldenfur threatened, but his voice cracked with amusement.
"You'll never catch me!"

Poolpelt charged around the Great Rock and dodged behind the oaks, Goldenfur never more than a tail-length behind her, until she flopped onto the ground, panting.
"I can't run anymore!" she gasped.

Goldenfur collapsed beside her.
"Sun-face!" she whispered.
He suddenly flipped himself over and sunk his teeth softly into her scruff, pinning her to the ground.
"Who's a sun-face?" he mewed through a mouthful of fur.
"No one!" She wailed.

Goldenfur rolled off and sat up, catching his breath.
Poolpelt pushed herself onto her haunches and leaned against him, enjoying the smoothness of his pelt and the firmness of his muscles beneath.

Goldenfur sighed. "I've waited so many moons for this." He twisted his head and looked down into her eyes. "For you."
Poolpelt dropped her gaze to her paws.
Goldenfur nuzzled her as she looked up at him.

"Every cat in my Clan's been telling me to get a mate," he murmured. "But I want no other mate but you."
"I know what you mean," Poolpelt mewed. "Bladewing told me I should be mates with..." She stopped, seeing hurt spark his gaze.
Goldenfur leaned away. "Is there another cat who...?"
"No," Poolpelt mewed quickly. "Only..."

"Only what?"
"I've been raising Feathershine's kit. I haven't had time to think about mates."
"You've done a great job. Your sister would be proud of you. But Featherfall's a warrior now," Goldenfur pointed out. "You've got time to live your own life."

"Maybe," Poolpelt whispered. "But this can never happen."
"What?"
"Us."

"Why?" Hurt cracked Goldenfur's mew.

Poolpelt couldn't believe it wasn't obvious. "We're from different Clans!"

Pain twisted her heart.
She tried to push it away but it hung there like grief, cold and heavy.
She pressed closer to Goldenfur, and his warmth eased her sadness.

"If we carry on meeting like this," she murmured, "we'll end up being hurt."
"The only thing that can hurt me," Goldenfur breathed, "is being apart from you."

Poolpelt knew it was true, for her and him.
But she couldn't change her destiny.
She stared up at the Great Rock, glittering with frost.
The Clan leaders would be horrified if they could see what was happening.

Goldenfur stirred beside her. "What is it?"
"Nothing." She turned to Goldenfur. "Let's stay the night here."
"Let's build a nest," Goldenfur suggested.

They scraped together a heap of leaves beneath one of the roots in an oak tree, and curled up together in the frost-scented darkness.

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~~~~~~

Chapter 38

A soft tail-tip stroked Poolpelt's cheek.
"Time to wake up." Goldenfur's whisper stirred her ear fur.

Poolpelt blinked open her eyes and stretched, the leaves of their nest rustling beneath her.
It was still dark in the hollow, but above the trees the sky was turning milky with predawn light.
She sat up, heart racing.
She had to get home.

Goldenfur was looking at her, his eyes glowing like the Moonstone.
"I don't want to leave you."
"But we must." She pressed his muzzle to his.

They padded to the edge of the clearing and paused, twining tails.
Their time together was over.

"I'll look out for you on the riverbank," Goldenfur promised.
Poolpelt pressed against him. "I'll look out for you, too." Her voice came out as a whisper.
She knew the river would always divide them.

"I might even climb a few trees to keep in practice," he joked.
"Yes." She felt weary with sadness.
Why was he so cheerful?
Didn't he realize they would never be together like this again?
She gazed into his eyes and knew that he did.
Behind the brightness she recognized grief, raw as her own.

"Goodbye, my dearest love..." she whispered, and headed up the slope.

She glanced back again and again until the pain of seeing him standing beneath the oak trees was too much to bear.

Then she fixed her gaze firmly ahead and bounded up to the top of the hollow.
But as she crested the rise, she felt Goldenfur's gaze still scorching her pelt.

I must be as strong as fire!

The woods were full of shadows, and it took her a while to adjust to the dark as she wove around the brambles and squeezed through the clumps of fern.

Her heart quickened as she felt snow crunch beneath her paw-pads again; a Clanmate might be roaming the snowy forest.
Not this early, she told herself.
But she still tensed at every rustle and scent drifting on the air.

She slid down the ravine, holding her breath as her paws sent a shower of grit tumbling down below.

To her relief, Briarfang was nowhere to be seen.
The camp entrance was unguarded.

She slunk inside and headed straight for the warriors's den, her gaze flitting nervously around the silent snowy clearing.
Yellow light was rolling across the sky, reaching down to pierce the shadows beneath the snowy trees.
The dawn patrol would be gathering soon.

Poolpelt padded up and into the stone den, tense as a hunted mouse, and tiptoed to her nest.
Thornwing grumbled as she brushed past his nest, but no one stirred.
Curling down into her nest, Poolpelt closed her eyes.

She didn't want to sleep; she wanted to remember, to relive the moments she'd spent with Goldenfur.
She had only spent one night with him, and she loved him more deeply than she had thought was possible.
How could she live, never talking to him again?
Worse than that—how could she see him at Gatherings or on the shore and pretend they were enemies?

But there was no choice.
She was a IceClan warrior, loyal to the warrior code.
And that meant she couldn't be mates with a cat from another Clan.
No matter how much he filled her thoughts.

Poolpelt's head was fuzzy with tiredness when she joined her Clanmates to wait for orders about the day's patrols.

Thornwing couldn't wait to get started. "I've been stuck in camp all morning," he complained.
"*Someone* had to fix that hole in the camp wall," Briarfang told him.
"And you did a good job, too," Ravenbird added. "It's stronger than ever."

Braveheart hurried over, licking his lips. "Sorry I'm late," he apologized. "I was starving. Had to eat."
Springleaf shook her head. "You'd have made Stormclaw proud," she teased, reminding them all of the greedy old elder.

Icestar was pacing around them.
Rainpelt was with Flowertail, complaining of sickness, so the IceClan leader was in charge of organizing the patrols again.

"Briarfang, take Thornwing, Featherfall, Blackfrost, and Shadowfoot," Icestar ordered. "Re-mark the new DawnClan borders. But be careful. They might be planning an ambush."
She paused, as though wondering whether to send more warriors.
"We'll check the area thoroughly before we climb the rocks," Briarfang reassured her.

Icestar nodded. "Good. Springleaf, you can take Ravenbird, Braveheart and Poolpelt to check the Twoleg border."

The tortoiseshell she-cat dipped her head, then turned to the members of her patrol. "Come on," she called. "Let's go scare a few kittypets!" Her tone was light and amused, to Poolpelt's relief.
Poolpelt hadn't forgotten Blackfrost's treatment of the black kit—and right now, she didn't think she could scare a mouse.

"We'll split into pairs," Springleaf told them as they reached

Tallpines. "I'll check near the treecutplace with Ravenbird. You two, check the Twoleg border." She nodded to Poolpelt and Braveheart.

She hardly heard her. In her mind, she was sitting in the Great Oak beneath the stars, with Goldenfur beside her.
"Are you coming?" Braveheart's mew was muffled by the frozen bramble he was holding back in his jaws. He used his tail to beckon Poolpelt through the gap he had made.
"Thanks," she murmured, padding past him.

"It's a shame we're not hunting today. I'd love to pick up some tips from you." Braveheart hurried after her. "You have a great nose." He hesitated. "I mean, you can detect the slightest scent."
"Oh...er...thanks," Poolpelt stammered.

He stopped to re-scent a marker as they reached the border.
Poolpelt turned away.

She stared at the Twoleg fence rising ahead of them.
This was where she'd seen Silverstar hunt.
As if he knew what she was thinking, Braveheart sighed. "I wonder if Silverstar watches Twolegplace even in StarClan?"
Poolpelt flicked her tail. "She didn't *mean* to hunt in Twolegplace and act like a kittypet."

Braveheart turned to her with his eyes stretched wide. "How can a Clan cat become a kittypet? I'd rather be DawnClan first—and that would be bad enough."
Poolpelt looked at the fence and said nothing.
If I were DawnClan, everything would be so much easier.

By the the time they reached camp again, Poolpelt was too tired to feel anything.
She headed for her nest, padding up and trotting forward into the stone den.

Rainpelt was curled in her own nest, fast asleep, huddled tight as though she was bone-cold.
But IceClan cats can withstand subzero temperatures.

As Poolpelt padded past her, her pelt pricked.
A sharp, sour scent was drifting from her: the stench of illness, so strong that it turned her black paws cold.
She suddenly noticed how her bones jutted through her scrawny pelt.
Rainpelt was really sick.
IceClan might need a new deputy any moment.

Poolpelt hurried out of the den.
Was Rainpelt going to die?
I'll ask Flowertail. Please let her make sense this time!
She had to know.
It was too soon.
How could she possibly become deputy when she hadn't even finished training her first apprentice?

When she reached the medicine cat den, the medicine cat was already surrounded by her Clanmates at the entrance.

Springleaf was shaking her head. "I haven't had a decent night's sleep in days, with her coming and going in the night."
Ravenbird agreed. "The only exercise she does is padding back and forth to the dirtplace."
"Will she recover in time?" Featherfall asked.

Poolpelt pushed in beside the pale white tabby warrior. "Are you talking about Rainpelt?" she whispered.
Featherfall nodded.

"She does seem even sicker than usual," Thornwing put in.
Flowertail's gaze was heavy with worry. "We've tried everything, but nothing helps."

Poolpelt flicked her tail. What was Flowertail trying to tell them?
"She recovered last time," she pointed out.
"She wasn't this sick last time," Flowertail countered. "Icestar will have to start thinking about appointing a new deputy before long."

She stared at Poolpelt, her gaze suddenly sharp and excited as a kit's.
Poolpelt stiffened. Was this her chance?

A voice behind her murmured, "Oh, yes, it's time for me to take Rainpelt's place."
Poolpelt spun around.
Blackfrost stood behind her, where Flowertail could see him, too. The black tom's eyes were glowing, his tail high, his well-muscled shoulders sleek in the sunshine.

Icestar wants a cat with youth and energy to serve beside her.
Poolpelt remembered Flowertail's words with a shiver.
Right now, Blackfrost seemed to be the strongest, most promising cat in the Clan.

Would Icestar choose him to be the next deputy instead?

Chapter 39

The snowy branches rustled as Poolpelt's Clanmates filed into the den, bringing with them the tang of a cold leaf-bare wind.
They had just returned from the Gathering.

Poolpelt lifted her head. "How was it?" She yawned, wanting only to go back to sleep.
She had been so tired lately, drowsiness weighting her black paws through the day, her sleep heavy at night.

She'd felt unusually clumsy in the cold hollow, too, and was relieved that Splashstream had been made a warrior, along with her sisters, Riverpelt and Robinheart.
With no more training sessions to attend, she'd had a chance to let her battle practice slide.

Amberleaf kneaded her nest and stepped on it. "I'll tell you in the morning," she murmured, closing her eyes.

Duskwing was more talkative, clearly still buzzing from the Gathering as she plumped up the moss in the nest on Poolpelt's other side. "Sparrowstar lost his ninth life," she announced. "He died from old age."
Poolpelt sat up. "He's dead?"

Duskwing nodded. "Yeah! And you'll never believe this! Pineclaw was found dead in DawnClan, so Sparrowstar had chosen a new deputy before he died."
Poolpelt gasped. "He chose a new deputy?" She was shocked. She never really liked Pineclaw, but didn't expect his death to rattle her so much.
"Yes. Sunstar's the leader of DawnClan now."
Poolpelt narrowed her eyes. *The kittypet friend is the leader of DawnClan? Won't that make DawnClan look weak?*

"Who is the new deputy?" Poolpelt pricked her ears. She knew Goldenfur had set his heart on it.
"Foxflight."
Foxflight? But Goldenfur is Sunstar's best friend. How could she overlook him like that?

She kept the thought to herself.
She hadn't seen Goldenfur in the last moon—not since they'd met at Fourtrees.
She'd avoided the Gathering by telling Icestar that she'd wretched her shoulder jumping down the ravine.
She couldn't bear to see the trees where they'd sat, or the remnants of the nest they'd made together.
And to see Goldenfur himself and not be able to share more than polite words would have been agony.

"And there was a fight," Duskwing breathed.
"At the Gathering?" Poolpelt was shocked.
"A new SmokeClan apprentice called Nightpaw went for two DawnClan apprentices. Goldenfur had to break it up."

He was there! Pain pierced her heart like a ice.
He would have been looking for her. She hoped he understood why she hadn't gone.

"Shadowfoot wanted to join in," Duskwing added. "Blackfrost practically had to sit on him to stop him. Darkstar was so embarrassed. He assigned Nightpaw to clean the elders's den for the next moon. You should have seen Crowsight's face when he did that. He was furious. He acted like he was proud that his daughter nearly shredded two apprentices."
Duskwing shook her head. "SmokeClan is turning into a bunch of fox-hearts."

Poolpelt settled back into her nest, picturing Goldenfur as her eyes grew heavy with sleep.
Duskwing chanted on. EchoClan's cats had lost their plumpness already. DawnClan had acted like they'd never had Icerocks in the first place...
Poolpelt dozed.

"I'm not surprised you didn't come tonight." Duskwing's comment jolted her awake.
"Why?"
"Have you told Icestar yet?"
Told her what? Poolpelt's heart began to race.
Did Duskwing know something?
Had someone at the Gathering given their secret away?

"Told her what?" She asked shakily.
Duskwing blinked at her. "That you're expecting kits."
Expecting kits?
I can't be! Poolpelt stared at her denmate in horror.

"Don't worry about being nervous," Duskwing brushed her tail along Poolpelt's flank. "It's natural the first time."

Amberleaf was awake now. "Poolpelt! You're having kits? Why didn't you tell me? Does Braveheart know yet?"
"Keep your voice down!" Poolpelt hissed.
Amberleaf ducked closer. "Sorry," she whispered. "But I'm so pleased. I knew there was something going on between you and Braveheart. He'll make a brilliant father."

Duskwing's ears twitched. "I didn't know there was anything going on between you and Braveheart."
There isn't! Poolpelt bit back the words.

They'd only want to know who the real father was. "Don't say anything to him," she pleaded.
"You want to tell him yourself, of course," Duskwing purred. "I understand. But you're going to have to say something soon. You're getting awfully big. Even the toms will be noticing soon."

As Duskwing and Amberleaf settled down to sleep beside her, Poolpelt gazed into the darkness at the edge of the den as a streak of tear fell down her cheek.

When morning came she heaved herself from her nest, suddenly aware of the extra weight in her belly.
How had she not noticed?

Outside, the warriors were gathering around Hawkflame, who was assigning duties for the day.
Rainpelt slept in the medicine den now, and had pretty much given up her role as deputy.

Poolpelt stumbled past her Clanmates and headed for Icestar's den. Pausing outside, she called from the lichen. "Can I speak with you?"
"Is that Poolpelt?" Icestar's voice echoed from inside. "Come in."
Poolpelt nosed through the lichen, fighting queasiness.

Icestar was sitting beside her nest, washing her face. "Are you okay?"
"I'm not feeling well," Poolpelt told her. "May I be excused from patrols?"

Icestar tilted her head to one side. "Is it something you've eaten?"
"Maybe."
"Of course you're excused, but you must see Flowertail if you don't feel better by sunhigh."
"I just need some fresh air," Poolpelt assured her, backing out of the den.

She padded for the camp entrance, seeking the solitude and peace of the snowy forest.

Braveheart broke away from the knot of warriors and caught up to her as she neared the stone tunnel. "Are you okay?"
"Fine." Poolpelt didn't even look at him, but kept walking.
Braveheart fell back and left her alone to squeeze through the tunnel.

It hurt her sides, as she could feel the stone pressing against her fur.

Her belly *had* swollen.
Poolpelt felt heavy and tired as she hauled herself up to the side of the ravine.
She was breathless by the time she reached the top.

She sat and looked down at her round belly.
Were there really kits growing inside her?
A rush of protectiveness surged through her, and she leaned down

awkwardly to lick the soft fur.

The sound of the first patrol leaving the camp made her stand up and trot into the snowy cover of the ferns.
She kept going until the noise faded behind her.
When she looked up, the trees ahead were thinning, outlined against the sky.

Her paws had led her to the river.
She was honest enough with herself to know that she wanted the reassurance of Goldenfur.
She wanted to share her news.
But would he still be looking out for her?

She padded down the smooth stone slope and sat at the water's edge.
The far bank had been stripped by leaf-bare frosts, and she could see far into the trees.

What would happen now?
How would she explain these kits?

Sun will destroy you.
What this what the prophecy meant?
Having kits that were half-DawnClan?

Clouds covered the sky, yellow and heavy with the threat of heavy snow.
Poolpelt shivered and scanned the far bank once more.
She couldn't wait any longer.
She was hungry and cold.
As she turned, disappointed, to head up the bank, a flash of movement on the other side of the river caught her eye.

She leaned forward hopefully, her heart quickening when recognized the thick-furred, golden tabby pelt of Goldenfur.
But there were other cats with him. He was on a patrol, flanked by Stormclaw and Sparkshine.
Poolpelt backed away as the DawnClan patrol padded to the river's edge, but it was too late.
The cats had spotted her.

Stormclaw scowled across the water. "Hoping to hunt on our territory?" he sneered.
Goldenfur didn't look at Poolpelt. "IceClan doesn't like getting their paws dirty," he meowed to the tom. "You two go back to camp and tell Sunstar that IceClan is at the border," Goldenfur told his Clanmates. "I'll stay here and see how many more of them are hanging around."
Stormclaw and Sparkshine hared away into the trees.

Goldenfur stood on the shore with water lapping his paws. "It's been a while," he called across the dark, swirling river.
"I—I need you."
Hope flared in Goldenfur's eyes.
Did he think she'd come to tell him they could meet in secret again?

He slid into the water and swam across, unswerving despite the tug of the current, gliding through the water as smoothly as an otter.
He padded onto the stones and trotted to her side. "What's the matter?"

Poolpelt looked at her black paws.
She couldn't just come out with it.
She hadn't seen him in a moon.
How would he react?

"Your best friend didn't make you deputy," she meowed.
"No."
"But I thought you wanted to be leader one day."
"She offered. I refused. I haven't earned it yet. But I will." Goldenfur glanced over his shoulder. "We don't have long. What's the matter?"
"Are you disappointed—about not being deputy?"
"Poolpelt!" His mew grew stern. "Sunstar is about to send a patrol."

"Okay." She took a deep breath. "I'm going to have kits."
Goldenfur's eyes widened like an owl's.
"It'll be all right." He pressed against her, his wet fur icy on her pelt. "Our kits will be great. Brave and strong and clever—good at hunting *and* climbing trees!"
Poolpelt flinched. "We're in different Clans," she reminded him.

"That's a problem," Goldenfur admitted. "But you can join

DawnClan, or I can join IceClan. It's been done before."
"Has it?" Poolpelt asked.
"There's a cat in your Clan—Crowclaw—whose father was EchoClan. Didn't you know that?"

Poolpelt shook her head, shocked. "Are you sure?"
So that means Blackfrost and Featherfall have EchoClan blood!
"Yes."
"So why does no one talk about it?" she asked.

Poolpelt knew why. "Because if it's true... the IceClan cats who let Crowclaw be raised in their camp, the EchoClan cats who didn't claim him as their own.. They'd rather forget it. Do you want our kits to grow up like that?"

"But if I joined IceClan, they'd be IceClan kits," Goldenfur argued.
Poolpelt stared. "You'd do that for me?"
"For you and for our kits, in a heartbeat."

"But you want to become leader one day. You could never do that in IceClan. You'd always be an outsider."
Goldenfur lowered his gaze. "There are plenty of cats in DawnClan who want to be leader."
"But you could do it!" Poolpelt felt wretched. She couldn't let him give up his dream. "You can't leave your Clan."

"Then will you leave yours and come to live with DawnClan?"
"I can't."
"If you're worried about hunting, I'll teach you, like I promised."
"It's not that." Poolpelt thought of Blackfrost with ambition burning in his eyes, and Flowertail's words: *Blood lies in his path. Flames lies in yours*.

"My Clan needs me."
Goldenfur's eyes glazed. "I need you, too."
Poolpelt slowly shook her head. "No, you don't. I'm going to raise these kits as IceClan. My Clanmates will assume that a IceClan cat is the father."

Goldenfur drew away sharply. "Any cat in particular?"
"No!" It came out as a sob. "But this is the only way it can be. Don't

you see that? To give our kits the best chance, I must raise them as if they were pure IceClan."

"What about me?" Goldenfur protested.
Poolpelt let tears sprout. "It's my problem!" She sobbed, turning to leave. "I'm the one having these kits! I'll be the one raising them without a father!"
"They can have a father if you want," Goldenfur breathed.

Poolpelt felt something move in her belly.
The kits were starting to fidget.
Did they know what was going on?
I'll make it okay, she promised them as she headed up the bank.

"I'll be here if you need me," Goldenfur called after her. "I love you, Poolpelt. Whatever happens, they will always be my kits, too!"

Chapter 40

[image]

Her belly rumbling with hunger, Poolpelt padded home through the snowy forest.
She couldn't push away the image of Goldenfur, and the way his eyes had glittered with sadness.

The leaf-bare trees creaked and rattled above her, and on either side of the trail, the bushes were dying back from the cold.

Had she really run through there as an apprentice?
Chased Feathershine between the snowy trees, caught her first prey, practiced fighting and hunting?
She had never realized how easy it had been or how happy she was.
Everything was different now.
Even the snowy trees looked unfamiliar.

"Poolpelt?"
Braveheart was calling her from the trail ahead. "Are you okay?" His eyes were round with concern.
Poolpelt padded on with her head down. "Just going back to camp."
He didn't step aside to let her pass, but gently held his tail up to block her way. "Stop," he ordered.
She looked into his eyes and saw a tenderness that took her by surprise.

"Amberleaf had just congratulated me on becoming a father," he meowed.
Poolpelt felt the world spin around her. "She couldn't! She promised!"

"Is she right? Are you having kits?"
"Yes, but... they're not yours... I didn't tell her you were the father,"
Mortified, Poolpelt searched for words. "She just guessed, and it was easier..." She stopped.

She waited for him to shout at her for heartbreak.

At last, he spoke. "I promise to not ask the father is," he meowed. "I respect your decision to keep it a secret."
Poolpelt plucked a snowy fern straying across the snow. "I'm sorry it didn't work out between us.. I-I would of been happy with you as my mate.. but.. I don't know what to do.."

Braveheart shifted his paws. "You can tell the Clan I'm the father.. i-if that's what you want."
Poolpelt stared at him. "You'd really do that?"
Braveheart nodded. "I love you, Poolpelt. I'd do anything to make you happy. I'll love your kits as if I was their real father."

"I-I don't know," she began.
Shrieks ripped the air.

Braveheart pricked his ears. "Blackfrost and Shadowfoot have found a trespasser by the sound of it. They may need help." He hared away down the path, heading for the river.
Poolpelt recognized that yowl. *Goldenfur!*
She pelted after Braveheart, puffing with the effort.

She skidded out onto the snowy shore and saw Blackfrost pinning Goldenfur to the stones by his throat.
Shadowfoot stood to one side, watching, while Braveheart circled nervously, scanning the far bank for cats coming to Goldenfur's rescue.

"You filthy grass-eater," the black warrior was growling into Goldenfur's stricken face. "What are you doing on our territory? I should rip your throat out!"

"There might be more on the way," Braveheart warned. "I'll get help." He vanished into the snowy forest.

Terror scorched through Poolpelt. "What are you doing?" She darted toward Blackfrost, unsheathing her claws, her eyes fixed on Goldenfur struggling in the warrior's grip.

Shadowfoot stepped forward to block her.

"This DawnClan filth is trespassing," he growled. "We have to punish him."

Staring past him, Poolpelt could see blood welling at Goldenfur's throat, turning Blackfrost's paws red.

Memories flashed through her.

Blackfrost turned to his apprentice. "Here, let's put it to my apprentice. What do you think, Shadowpaw? How should we handle this?"
"I think the kittypet should be taught a lesson," Shadowpaw hissed. "One it'll remember."

Tail bushed in terror, the kit tried to scramble to its paws. But Shadowpaw pounced again.
The white apprentice pinned the kit to the snow.
With claws unsheathed, he swiped at its muzzle, then raked its flank.
The kit squealed in agony.

With a shriek, she surged forward, knocking Shadowfoot off balance.
Claws out, she ripped Blackfrost off Goldenfur and flung him aside.
Blackfrost rolled over and sprang to his paws. "Have you gone mad?" he snarled. "It's not a kit this time! It's a DawnClan warrior. He's invading out territory!"

"Don't be ridiculous," Poolpelt snapped. "What could he do on his own?"
Blackfrost glared wildly around. "There may be others!"

"There aren't." Goldenfur had staggered to his paws, slowly twisting his head from side to side. "I—I got swept here by a wave. I'll leave now."
"Not so fast." Blackfrost sprang in front of him, blocking his exit.

Poolpelt darted between them. "Enough, Blackfrost! You've taught him a lesson. I'm sure he won't come back here again."
She met Goldenfur's gaze and saw nothing but sadness.
"Let him go." Her plea came as a whisper.
She was begging for Goldenfur, but the words echoed in her heart.
Let him go.

Goldenfur stumbled past her and slid into the river.

"Traitor!" Blackfrost shoved Poolpelt, sending her stumbling onto her haunches. His claws were still unsheathed and tufted with Goldenfur's fur. "You're a coward and a fool! I've never once seen you defend our borders. What kind of a warrior are you?"

He stepped close, his breath coming fast, his eyes wild with blood-hunger. "Do you *know* that DawnClan warrior?" he hissed slowly.
Fighting back panic, Poolpelt forced her pelt to lie flat. "He's called Goldenfur. I've seen him at Gatherings."
Blackfrost leaned closer until he was a whisker away from her muzzle. "I didn't ask if you knew who he was, I asked if you *knew* him."
Unblinking, he added, "Better than the warrior code allows."
Has he seen us together? Overheard something? Poolpelt forced herself to meet Blackfrost's gaze without flinching. "Of course not," she replied calmly.

Blackfrost lurched away and began to pace up and down the shore, staring across the river. "We need more patrols," he muttered. "It's too easy to invade. Too many invaders. Only fear will keep them out. We must mark our borders with the blood of our enemies."
Poolpelt backed away, shaking. He sounded insane!

Poolpelt shook her head. "Blackfrost, this is insane!"
Blackfrost whipped his head to her, snarling. "SILENCE! I hear more word out of you, you're gonna end up just like your father!"

Poolpelt snapped.

She lunged herself at Blackfrost with fury, claws unsheathed and baring her teeth.
She knocked Blackfrost to the ground, pinning him with violent force with Blackfrost hissing.

He raised his razor sharp claws and sliced through Poolpelt's shoulder, agony pierced through Poolpelt but she wouldn't give up, not until he felt the torture she put him through.

Blackfrost kicked her off with his hind legs, and she flew off, landing on her haunches.

They charged forward at each other, attacking and biting each other with yowls of anger.
Poolpelt raised her sharp claws and dug them and raked them through Blackfrost's left shoulder and he hissed in pain.

Blackfrost growled as he circled Poolpelt dangerously.
Poolpelt's eyes were in slits, ready to fight him off.

He then lunched forward and gripped the tip of her ear, and pulled, and pulled until the agony of the piece of her ear boiled her body and she let out a scream of pain and blood dripped from her ear.

She huffed, glaring at Blackfrost as she wiped blood from her muzzle. "Had enough?"
Blackfrost snarled. "Never!" And he unsheathed his claws.

The frozen undergrowth shook as Braveheart burst onto the shore. Hawkflame, Bluefeather, and Thornwing hurtled out behind him.

Braveheart gapsed, "Poolpelt! What happened to your ear!?"
When Poolpelt was about to explain that Blackfrost had threatened her and he did it, but Blackfrost had turned around, his eyes were mind and his fur flat. "Goldenfur. Nothing to worry about," he mewed evenly. "Just a DawnClan warrior sniffing around. We'll chased them off."
"Nice job," Hawkflame praised.
"Well spotted," Bluefeather added.

Braveheart caught Poolpelt's eye, puzzled.
Poolpelt shook her head.

Hawkflame nodded at Shadowfoot. "I hope you're still learning from Blackfrost. He's quite a warrior. Impressive paw steps to fill."
Shadowfoot dipped his head. "I never miss a thing." He meowed smoothly.

"Is the area clear?" Hawkflame asked.

"Clear." Blackfrost headed into the snowy trees.
He didn't even glance at Poolpelt.
It was if their battle had never happened at all.

Poolpelt tagged behind with Braveheart as the patrol headed back to camp.
Was Goldenfur okay?
Did he make it back to his Clanmates?
At least Stormclaw's patrol hadn't come back to look for him.
It would only have confirmed Blackfrost's paranoia.

Blood lies in his path.
Poolpelt shivered. She had to warn Icestar.

When she reached camp, her ear started to sting less and less and the blood started to dry up.

The IceClan leader listened to reports from Blackfrost and Hawkflame.
She'd taken them to her den and, frustrated, Poolpelt could only guess what Blackfrost was telling her about Goldenfur's "invasion."

She waited impatiently, pacing around the snowy clearing even though her paws were sore and tired.
"Here." Braveheart dropped a sparrow at her black paws. "You need to eat."
Poolpelt sighed and sat down.
It was pointless to pretend she wasn't hungry. Her belly felt empty all the time now.

Braveheart watched as she began to eat. "Have you thought about what I said?" he asked.
Poolpelt swallowed. "Do you really mean it?"
Braveheart nodded.
"Thank you."

As she bent down to take another bite of sparrow, the lichen at Icestar's den swished, and Hawkflame and Blackfrost padded out.
Poolpelt glanced at Braveheart. "I'll be back in a moment."

She hurried to the IceClan leader's den. "It's Poolpelt," she called

through the lichen.
"Come in."
She pushed her way in, sending light rippling across the cave floor.

Icestar sat in shadow. "We're lucky to have loyal warriors like Blackfrost."
Poolpelt stiffened. "I know he's loyal, but—!"
Icestar cut her off. "He's a warrior IceClan can be proud of."

"But I was there when he was attacking Goldenfur."
"*Attacking?*" Icestar eyed her quizzically. "I thought he was defending. Goldenfur was the one who was trespassing. Blackfrost was merely following the warrior code."
"The warrior code speaks of fairness and mercy," Poolpelt began.
"He would have murd—!" Before she could finish, Icestar interrupted.

"You shouldn't get involved in any more border skirmishes."
Poolpelt was puzzled.
Didn't she trust her?
What had Blackfrost said about her?

Icestar glanced at her belly. "At least not until your kits are born."
"You know?" Poolpelt gasped.
"It's getting obvious," Icestar purred. "I may not have kits, but I know what an expectant queen looks like."

She padded past her, nosing through a gap in the lichen.
Then she paused and looked back. "You'll be a wonderful mother, an asset to the Clan."

A small sigh escaped her. "I had hoped that one day you'd follow in my paw steps, but StarClan seems to have a different path for you. Fortunately," she went on on, gazing out at the snowy clearing, "there's another who may be able to lead this Clan one day."

Belly tightening, Poolpelt followed her gaze.
She was staring at Blackfrost.

The black warrior was boasting about his great victory over Goldenfur to an excited knot of cats, while Shadowfoot raked the

air, demonstrating his moves.
Chilled to the bone, Poolpelt backed away.

Blackfrost couldn't be allowed to take over IceClan. He would destroy them all!

Chapter 41

[image]
[image]

"Are they coming yet?" Snowheart called.
She tugged Crowkit back by his tail and tucked him in their nest beside his sister.
Cinderkit had fallen asleep, tired of waiting for her new denmates to arrive.

Sunlight filtered into the nursery, muted by the thick layer of snow weighing heavily on the stone roof.
Inside it was warm from the breath of several cats crowded together.

"It won't be long," Owlpool murmured, concentrating hard as Poolpelt shuddered with another contraction.

Owlpool placed her paw on Poolpelt's belly. "I can feel your body trying to push the kits out."
When Flowertail had moved to the elders's den half a moon ago, Owlpool had become the new medicine cat.

"Get your paws off!" Poolpelt hissed, wracked by another contraction.
As it faded, she let a sigh of relief. "Sorry," she muttered. "I just didn't expect it to hurt this much."

"Did touching her belly hurt her?" Crowkit mewed.
Owlpool flicked her tail. "No," she assured the black kit. "Queens can be a bit crabby when kitting." She narrowed her eyes at Poolpelt. "Some are crabbier than others."
"You'd be crabby if you'd been kitting since dawn!" Poolpelt snapped, pain convulsing her body once more.
Oh, Feathershine, help me!

"Here comes the first one," Owlpool mewed.
Owlpool moved into position as a small, wet bundle tumbled into the nest.
"A tom!" Owlpool announced.
"Is he okay?" Poolpelt craned her neck to see her first kit, her paws trembling with excitement.

Owlpool leaned down and licked the kit's scruff fiercely.
Poolpelt gasped. "Is he breathing?"
Her heart lurched when Owlpool hesitated.
"Well?"
"He is now." Owlpool picked up the tiny kit and put him beside Poolpelt's belly.

He felt warm and damp against her fur.
Trembling with relief, Poolpelt leaned forward and sniffed her son. It was the most perfect scent in the world. "He's beautiful," she whispered.
He had Goldenfur's fur, muzzle, and eyes, but also had Poolpelt's black dapples, but not just on his back, but all over him.

Another wave of pain rippled along her flank.
Owlpool pressed her paw gently on her flank. "Not much longer,"

There was a final, heaving pain, and Poolpelt flopped down onto the moss, panting.
"Well done!" Owlpool congratulated her. "A she-kit! And both of them look healthy and strong."

She looked over and saw her she-kit. She had Goldenfur's fur but brighter and had Poolpelt's deep blue eyes.

Poolpelt wrapped her tail around her two new kits and held them tightly to her belly.
As they began to suckle, memory of the pain faded like a bad dream.
Goldenfur, we have a daughter and a son.

The stone scraped, and Braveheart padded into the den. "How is she?"

"Poolpelt's fine," Owlpool told him. "She has two healthy kits. A she-kit and a tom."

Braveheart purred with delight, and Poolpelt felt a rush of gratitude.
Poolpelt had announced to the Clan that Braveheart was the father of her kits.

Braveheart leaned into the nest and nuzzled them. "I would have been very proud to have been their father," he whispered to Poolpelt.
Poolpelt purred. "You're a good friend," she whispered back.

"What are you going to call them?" Snowheart mewed, padding from her nest.
"The golden she-cat will be Goldenkit," Poolpelt purred; she had decided to name her after her father.
"And the golden-dappled tom will be Sunkit." She mewed, giving him a name that reminded her of sunlight.

Owlpool's whiskers twitched. "So you're not letting the father decide on any of the names?" She teased. "You always *were* determined, Poolpelt." Behind her eyes, curiosity gleamed.
Sorry, Owlpool. You've been good to me, but this is my secret to keep.

Poolpelt bent over her kits once more and began lapping at their damp pelts.
If only Goldenfur could see them.
She recognized the shape of the warrior's head in Goldenkit and felt his thick-fur as she washed Sunkit.
I love you enough for both of us, she promised.

Hugging them closer, she closed her eyes and drifted into sleep.

Snow still lay heavy in the camp half a moon later.
Poolpelt was worried that her kits would get too cold, after all, they are *half* DawnClan.
She sat near the nursery entrance and watched battling at drifting snowflakes, squeaking with excitement.

"Should I take them inside?" She asked Snowheart.
"Kits are tougher than they look," Snowheart soothed.

The kits hopped through the snow, chasing each other's tails. Crowkit and Cinderkit, three moons older, were teasing them by flicking lumps of snow at them and then looking innocent when the kits skidded to a halt to complain.

Briarfang was clearing snow from the stone tunnel, helped by Crowclaw and Swiftfur.
Blackfrost was demonstrating fighting moves to Dovepaw and Berrypaw next to the snow-crushed nettle patch.

Icestar and Hawkflame were digging through the snow where the fresh-kill pile used to be.
"Nothing left." Icestar sat back on her haunches, disappointed.
Hawkflame sighed. "We'll just have to keep sending out hunting patrols until someone catches something."
He glanced toward the nursery, his eyes dark with worry. "Even the queens are starting to look thin."

Owlpool was carrying a bundle of herbs to the elders's den.
"Is everything okay?" Icestar called to her.
"Yes," Owlpool mumbled through her jawful of leaves. "I'm just trying to make sure it stays that way."

She nodded to Flowertail, who was padding out of the elders's den.
"Settled in now?"
"What?" Flowertail looked distracted.
"Is your nest comfortable?" Owlpool pressed.
"Yes, fine." Flowertail padded across the snowy clearing as Owlpool disappeared into the elders's den.

Poolpelt watched the old medicine cat approach.
She had a fierce, glazed look in her eyes that made her pelt tingle. What was she going to say this time?

She glanced down at her kits, who were now tumbling down that snow that had drifted against the warriors's den.
"Don't disturb Ravenbird!" she warned. "He's trying to get some rest."

"We won't," Sunkit promised, clambering up the pile again and bundling back down.
He sat at the bottom, scattering snow when he shook his ears.
Poolpelt shook her head fondly.

A shadow fell across her. "This was not part of the prophecy," Flowertail hissed. "Flames must burn without bonds."
Poolpelt stood up and faced her. She may have doubted once that flames burned inside her, but she was sure now it did. She felt it scorching beneath her pelt, giving her the strength of a lion to protect her kits.
"The prophecy can wait," she growled. "My kits need me now."

"What about your Clan?" Flowertail turned and looked at Blackfrost on the other side of the snowy clearing.
The warrior's coat was ridged with snow as he tried to coax Dovepaw to reach higher with his swiping forepaws.
"Stretch your claws!" he snapped. "You won't be fighting mice."
Poolpelt sighed. What could she do?

"Watch this!" Goldenkit called as she flung herself headfirst down the snow pile.
The stone den made a loud thud noise as Ravenbird stormed out.
"Can't you kits play somewhere else?" he grumbled.

Poolpelt called, "I'm sorry, Ravenbird. I warned them."
Ravenbird's gaze softened as Sunkit tumbled toward him, squealing.
"Look at *meeeeeee!*"
"I suppose they're not kits for long," the warrior sighed, padding toward the elders's den. "Perhaps Speckledall will let me squeeze in with her for a nap."

Flowertail turned back to Poolpelt, and her emerald green eyes were as empty as the sky. "If Blackfrost becomes deputy, it will be the end of IceClan."

Poolpelt narrowed her eyes. "My kits need me," she repeated.
"They're not just *your* kits," Flowertail told her. "They have a father who would raise them."
Poolpelt's heart lurched. "What do you mean?"
"I saw you," Flowertail murmured, "With Goldenfur, at Fourtrees."

Poolpelt flinched as if she'd struck her. *She knows!*

"I do not stand in judgement, Poolpelt," Flowertail mewed gently. "You never set out to betray your Clan. But these kits will drown in blood with the rest of their Clanmates unless you act. You are still the flames that will scorch a different path for IceClan."

"Mom!" Sunkit's panicked squeak made her spin around.
Goldenkit had tumbled into a drift up to her ears.
Poolpelt hurried over and plucked her out by the scruff, shaking the snow from the tiny bundle of fur and placing her on a firmer patch.

Was Flowertail right?
Was she the only one who could save her Clan?

Heart quickening, she glanced at the sky. *StarClan, give me a sign!*
But she saw nothing except the thick, creamy clouds of leaf-bare.

Snow slumped from the stone tunnel as a hunting patrol pushed through the stone tunnel.
Featherfall, Thornwing, and Springleaf padded into the camp, tails down.
Featherfall clutched one scrawny sparrow in her jaws.

"Is that it?" Icestar demanded, bounding over to inspect the catch.
"We've been everywhere," Thornwing reported. "The forest is empty."

"Did you try digigng?" Icestar pressed.
"The prey is too well hidden," Springleaf sighed.

Icestar scanned the camp, her gaze flitting over her Clanmates, all as thin as bones. "The queens must be fed first," she decided.

Featherfall carried the sparrow to the nursery entrance and laid it at Snowheart's paws.
The white queen glanced at Poolpelt. "You have first bite," she offered.

Gratefully Poolpelt bit into the sparrow.
She'd been hungry for days, and she knew from the way her kits paddled their little feet against her belly that she wasn't producing

enough milk for them.

Owlpool wove her way through the drifts from the elders's den, the branches dropping snow on her pelt.
"Is that fresh-kill?" she called. She stared, disappointed, at the half-chewed sparrow. "The elders are starving," she sighed.

"They can have a bite of this," Snowheart offered.
Owlpool shook her head.

"What about Rainpelt?" Poolpelt suggested. "She needs to keep her strength up."
The IceClan deputy no longer even left the medicine den to use the dirtplace.

She picked up the sparrow, ready to take it to her.
Owlpool stopped her with a paw. "She won't eat it," she murmured. "She hasn't been able to keep anything down for days."
Poolpelt froze. "Is she dying?"
Owlpool steadily met her gaze. "She's not getting better."

Poolpelt hardly heard her.
She was staring at Blackfrost.
The black warrior was watching Owlpool with pricked ears.
His eyes gleamed.

Poolpelt blinked.
Blackfrost's black pelt was glistening.
Was he *wet?*
Something dark and sticky was flowing down his pelt.

Blood!
Blackfrost was drenched with blood.
It oozed him from his fur and dripped from his whiskers, staining the snow around him scarlet.
Horrified, Poolpelt backed away.

"What is it?" Owlpool mewed. "Poolpelt?"
When she felt the medicine cat's tail touch her shoulder, Poolpelt blinked and the blood disappeared.
Blackfrost was glaring at her, his black pelt once more clean and

dry.

She caught Flowertail's eye, and she nodded.
She'd seen it too.
A vision of IceClan's path if Blackfrost was to lead them.

Shaking, Poolpelt stared at her kits. *How could I give up?*

"I'm hungry!" Goldenkit complained, trotting up with her tail sticking out.
"Let's go inside." The words stuck in Poolpelt's throat.
I have no choice. I have to save my Clan.

A full moon hung above Fourtrees.
The clouds had cleared though snow still smothered the forest.
The Gathering had begun.

Poolpelt stared around the clearing, blind to the cats mingled around her.
She saw the roots where she'd made a nest with Goldenfur; the branches they had climbed to look at the sky.
She wished she were high up there now, closer to the stars than to the problems of her Clan, far from the grief that tore at her heart.

Stop it!
There was no time to indulge in sadness or memories.
She searched the pelts streaming around her.
Where are you, Goldenfur? Please be here.

The hollow was noisy, full of chatter, swirling with cats.

Icestar had let her come to the Gathering even though she was a nursing queen; she wondered if something in her eyes had persuaded her.
She pictured her kits now, safe and warm beside Snowheart's belly.

Goldenfur!
She spotted his golden tabby pelt swimming through the crowd.
Shouldering her way through a cluster of SmokeClan warriors, she headed for him, keeping her gaze on his pelt in case she lost sight of

him.

"Goldenfur," she hissed as soon as he was close enough to hear.
He spun around, his eyes lightning up when he saw her.
"We need to talk."
He nodded and darted away, beckoning Poolpelt with his tail.
She followed as he weaved out of the crowd and slid behind one of the great oaks.

"I heard about the kits," he whispered. "How are they? What do they look like?" His eyes were glowing with pride and, for a moment, Poolpelt forgot what she had come to tell him. If only he could see their kits, curled like sleepy dormice in the nursery.
"They're beautiful," she breathed. "I named them Sunkit and Goldenkit."
Goldenfur sighed and sat down. "I wish I could see them."

"You can." Poolpelt stiffened. "I can't keep them."
"What?" Goldenfur stared in disbelief.
"My Clan needs me more."
"I—I don't understand." His mouth hung open.

He thinks I'm heartless.
She looked at the cat that had once been her mate. "Our kits are lucky," she meowed. "They have both you and me to protect them. IceClan has only me."
"What are you asking me?" Goldenfur growled.

"You have to take them. I'll bring them to Icerocks tomorrow night."
Goldenfur narrowed his eyes. "If I take them, they'll be raised as DawnClan warriors," he warned. "For their own sakes, they will never know that you were their mother."

"I understand," Poolpelt whispered.
Would her kits forget her so easily?
How could she let them grow up without her?
She had to—or they would drown in blood with their Clanmates when Blackfrost came to power.

She blinked and turned to walk away.
She had to trust in StarClan.

And in Goldenfur.

His paw tugged her pelt.
"Poolpelt?"
"What?" She turned on him.

"This isn't like you," he murmured. "I can see how much you love our kits. You are a good mother."
Her voice cracked. "I can't be what I want to be. I need to be as strong as the flames. I need to save my Clan."
Grief clouded her gaze, and Goldenfur swam in front of her. "It is for the best," she whispered. "I hope they know that they have been loved. Even if they don't remember me, I hope they'll know that."
Goldenfur touched his muzzle to her cheek. "They will know," he promised. "And... thank you."

The warmth of his breath brought memories surging back until Poolpelt couldn't bear it any longer, and she wretched herself away.

She padded back into the throng of cats, knowing that each paw step took her farther from her kits.

Please, StarClan. Let this truly be the path you wish me to follow.

Chapter 42

"Wake up." Poolpelt kept her voice low so she didn't disturb Snowheart, Cinderkit, or Crowkit.

"Come on, Sunkit. Open your eyes." She gently shook her kits one by one and watched as they stretched, trembling, and opened their sleepy eyes.

Sunkit yawned. "Is it dawn?"
"Not yet," Poolpelt murmured. "So we have to be quiet. We don't want to wake anyone up."

"What's the matter?" Goldenkit squeaked.
"Hush." Poolpelt looked anxiously at Snowheart's nest. Crowkit was fidgeting in his sleep.

She wrapped her tail around her own kits, quieting them until Crowkit lay still, then whispered, "We're going to play a game, but you have to be very, very quiet."
Sunkit was wide awake now, blinking in the darkness. "What game?"
"It's called Secret Escape." Poolpelt made her eyes bright, forcing herself to look excited. She felt as if she were in a dream, and nothing she said or did was really happening.
Goldenkit jumped to her paws. "How do we play?"
"It's an adventure," Poolpelt explained. "We pretend that SmokeClan has invaded the camp. We have to escape without being seen, and meet our Clanmates at Icerocks."

Goldenkit stared at her with round, anxious eyes. "We're leaving the camp?"
Sunkit nudged her. "How else would we get to Icerocks, frost-brain?"

"But we've never been out of camp before," Goldenkit fretted. "We're

too little and I'm hungry," she complained.
Poolpelt fought the frustration pricking her nerves. "Okay," she mewed softly. "Let's eat first, then we'll start the game. Goldenkit, you're a big, strong kit now. You'll be fine, I promise."
She gave them what milk she had, which was even less than usual after so many days's hunger, and then nosed them put of the nest.

Sunkit bounced to the entrance. "I can't believe we're going out of camp!" he mewed excitedly.
"Hush," Poolpelt reminded him. "If we wake any cats, we've lost the game."

She padded out first and turned to scoop the two kits down into the snow.
There'd been a new fall since dusk, but the clouds had cleared and the camp shone white in the moonlight.
She scanned the clearing.
No sign of life.

Breath billowed from her mouth as she hurried her kits behind the nursery.
The air was needle-sharp cold. "We're going to use the dirtplace tunnel," she whispered, checking again that no one was around to see them. "That's what we'd do if we were really sneaking out of the camp."
Poolpelt hurried them through the narrow tunnel and out past the snowy bush that covered the dirtplace.

Goldenkit wrinkled her nose. "Stinky!"
Sunkit was staring up through the bare branches. "Wow! It's big out here!"
"I know, little one." Poolpelt nudged him on.

She remembered the first time she had left the camp, when Icestar —Icefrost, then—had taken her to the top of the ravine just before she was made an apprentice.
It had been the biggest adventure of her life, and she hadn't been able to imagine a time when scrambling up and down the ravine would feel ordinary or easy.

The side of the ravine loomed above them. The kits tipped back

their heads and stared up, their eyes huge and filled with the moon.
"I'll have to carry you up," Poolpelt told them. "Then you can see the real forest."
Goldenkit blinked. "There's more?"

Poolpelt pricked her ears, listening for Hawkflame. She knew he was guarding the camp tonight.
Sunkit pricked his ears, too. "Are SmokeClan warriors after us?" he squeaked. "In the game, I mean."
"They might be," Poolpelt whispered. "We have to keep a lookout, just in case. That's what makes it so exciting."

Goldenkit whipped around. "I think I see a SmokeClan warrior in the trees," she warned.
Poolpelt's heart lurched. "Where?"
"Only pretend," Goldenkit purred.
Sighing, Poolpelt scooped her up and tackled the first tumble of rocks.

Leaving the little golden kit at the top, she went back for Sunkit.

Sunkit wriggled when Poolpelt gently dropped him down beside his sister.
"My scruff hurts," Sunkit complained. "I bet I could have climbed some of it myself."
"There wasn't time." Poolpelt glanced at the moon rising in the sky. Goldenfur would be on his way.

Sunkit stared into the forest, where moon shadows darkened the snow. "I'm going first." He scampered ahead of his littermate, glancing over his shoulder. "Come on, Goldenkit."
Poolpelt nosed Goldenkit forward.

Even under cover of the trees, the snow was so deep that they had to struggle with every step, leaping out of one drift and sinking into the next.

She scooped them along, relieved that Sunkit seemed to be able to manage by himself.
He glanced back at her. "Does the forest go on *forever?*"
Poolpelt had wondered the same thing, all those seasons ago. She

shook her head. "But IceClan has a lot of territory. That's what feeds us and make us strong."

"It's not feeding the Clan much at the moment," Goldenkit grumbled.
"You should see it in greenleaf." Poolpelt's heart twisted. They'd be DawnClan.

Suddenly she wanted them to know everything about their birth Clan, and what it was to be a forest cat. "There are squirrels and birds and mice. All good hunting, once you've learned the techniques."

Sunkit squashed himself to the snowy ground. "Dovepaw's already told me how to do a hunting crouch," he mewed.
"That's wonderful, darling." Poolpelt felt a surge of pride as she saw his tail sticking out straight and still, keeping his haunches low while managing to lift his belly off the ground.
He was a natural.

"You try it," she urged Goldenkit. She wanted them to keep some memory of how IceClan hunted.
The golden kit crouched awkwardly.
"The snow's too cold," Goldenkit protested, fidgeting.

What am I doing?
The forest was freezing.
They needed to keep moving.
"Come on," she urged. "We can practice hunting another day."

They were halfway to Icerocks when the kits began to tire. Goldenkit was shivering, and Sunkit's eyes were glazed with exhaustion.

"Can we go home now?" He whimpered. "It's cold and I'm tired."
"We have to keep moving," Poolpelt insisted.
"I don't want to play this game anymore!" Goldenkit wailed.

Poolpelt realized how tiny they were out there beneath the trees, how thin their pelts were.
They should be snuggling beside the warmth of her belly, not

trekking through the forest with on a journey that no warrior would try in this weather.

"Just a bit farther," she urged.
Sunkit sat down and stared at her. "I can't feel my paws," he announced. "How can I walk if I don't know where my paws are?"

She had to get them to Icerocks!
IceClan depended on it.

A owl hooted.
Poolpelt stiffened, scanning the treetops as she gathered her kits closer.
They'd be nothing more than a mouthful of tasty prey to a hungry owl.

"I've got an idea," she told them.
Digging with her ice-numb paws, she scooped a hole in the snow underneath some ferns. "In you go," she encouraged.
The kits stumbled in and clustered into a small, shivering clump. At least they were out of the wind now.

"I'll be back for you in a moment." Poolpelt bounded a tree-length away and dug another hole, then hurried back to her kits.

"Where did you go?" Goldenkit wailed.
Sunkit's eyes were wide with fear. "We thought you weren't coming back!"
Poolpelt's heart twisted. "Oh, my precious kits," she murmured. "I'll always come back."
The words froze in her throat. How could she make a promise like that?
Forgive me, StarClan!

Swallowing her grief, she carried her kits one at a time to the next snow-hole, and pushed on alone to dig another.

Little by little, snow-hole by snow-hole, they drew nearer Icerocks. Each time she carried them, her kits complained less, struggled less, until they were hanging like limp, curled leaves when she tucked them into the final snow-hole.

"Can we go hime now?" Sunkit whimpered.

"There's someone we need to meet first." Poolpelt forced herself to sound bright.
"Who?" Goldenkit's mew was dull, as though she didn't really care what happened.

Poolpelt glanced through the trees toward Icerocks. There was no sign of Goldenfur.
"Let's all rest here for a bit," she suggested.
She squeezed into the snow-hole and wrapped herself around her kits.

They were colder than the snow, and pelts crunched with frost.

"Can we go home yet?" Sunkit asked as he shivered with coldness.
"You can sleep for a while here," Poolpelt told him.
Goldenkit snuggled closer.

"It's been a good adventure," Sunkit's mew was little more than a whimper. "Did we win?"
Poolpelt bent down and pressed her muzzle against the top of his head. "Oh, yes, little one. You won."
Sunkit's eyes were already closed.

Curling her tail around them, she pulled them tight into her belly. They were too tired to feed. She doubted she had any milk left for them anyway.
I will love you forever, my precious kits. Thank you for spending this moon with me.

She began to lap their pelts with her tongue, hoping to warm their cold, tired bodies.
Goldenkit was too tired to complain, her breath coming in tiny billows.

"Sunkit?"

The golden dappled kit wasn't fidgeting.

Poolpelt lapped his pelt again. "Sunkit!"
Panic started to grip her.

She stared at the little bundle of fur, looking for the rise of his flank, a puff of frozen breath.

The kit was perfectly still.

Poolpelt licked harder. "Sunkit, please wake up. Please. There's warmth and safety just on the other side of the river. Your father will look after you. I promise. Just a little bit farther, my fierce, brave warrior."

Poolpelt stopped licking and looked down at the small, snow-damp body.
Wake up!

Poolpelt. Feathershine's breath stirred her whiskers. Poolpelt smelled the scent of her sister drifting around the walls of the snow-hole. *Let him go. I'll look after him.*
"No! Don't take him, please."
He's already gone. There's nothing you can do.

Poolpelt gathered Sunkit between her paws. Goldenkit stirred beside her belly but didn't wake. *He wasn't supposed to die!*
It was his time. Feathershine's mew echoed in her ears. *I'll take care of him in StarClan.*

Feathershine's scent faded and the icy tang of leaf-bare filled the snow-hole once more.
Sunkit didn't move.

"Poolpelt?" Goldenfur's muzzle appeared at the mouth of the hole, sending warm breath billowing inside.
Goldenkit woke up and twitched her tail. "Bleh! Where is that air coming from!?"
"Nothing, little one. Don't be rude." Poolpelt forced herself to concentrate. She could still save her last kit.

"Go back to rocks," she told Goldenfur. "I'll bring her to you."
"But I could carry her," Goldenfur offered.
"I haven't told them who you are yet. Go back!"

As Goldenfur disappeared, she roused Goldenkit. "We have to get

moving."
"But I was just getting warm."
"You'll be even warmer soon," Poolpelt promised.

"Where are we going?" Goldenkit demanded.
"I'm taking you to meet your father."
Goldenkit looked confused. "But Braveheart is back at camp."

"Your *real* father. Goldenfur. From DawnClan."
"From *DawnClan?*" Goldenkit echoed in disbelief.
"Hurry up," Poolpelt ordered, nudging them out into the snow.

Goldenkit glanced back into the hole. "What about Sunkit?"
"I'll come back for him."

"But you said we were IceClan," Goldenkit wailed. "How can we be DawnClan as well?"

Poolpelt didn't answer.
She let Goldenkit stumble along underneath her belly, sheltered from the snow that had started to fall.

She glanced back, as if Sunkit might be struggling after them, wailing at them to let him catch up.
To her horror, the snow-hole was starting to fill up.
No! I might lose him!
She looked around wildly for somewhere to leave Goldenkit while she went back to rescue her brother.

Farther along the riverbank, two shapes were padding steadily away.
Had Goldenfur brought another cat with him?
No—these cats were unhindered by the snow, gliding over the surface.
Behind them, the snow was white and unmarked.
These cats left no paw prints behind.

One was full-grown, with a thick pelt of pale white fur that made her almost invisible.
The other was a golden and dappled with black, and barley as high as his companion's belly.

The kit was looking up eagerly at Feathershine as they walked, as if he was telling her something exciting.
Goodbye, Sunkit. Feathershine will look after you now.

"Ow!" Beneath Poolpelt, Goldenkit crashed forward onto her nose.
"This ground is *hard!*" she yowled.
They had reached the edge of Icerocks.

Paw steps crunched toward them.
"Are you okay?" Goldenfur asked quietly.
Poolpelt nodded without looking up at him.

His scent wreathed around her, warm and comforting.
For a fleeting moment Poolpelt longed to go with him.
She wanted to walk the rest of her days at Goldenfur's side.
Never have to leave him or her kit.
But she couldn't.
She had to save her Clan.

Goldenkit was staring up at the stranger with her head to one side.
"This is Goldenkit," Poolpelt trembled as she touched the golden kit with her nose.
Her throat grew tight. She began to back away, her eyes blurring.
I can't say goodbye to them!
"Please take care of them."

"Where's Sunkit?" Goldenfur called.
"Dead." Poolpelt stumbled but didn't look around, not wanting to take her eyes from Goldenkit.

"Mom, come back! Where are you going? Are you coming back to get me?"
Unable to bear her desperate cries, she turned and fled into the trees.

She stopped by the clump of ferns.
The snow-hole had vanished, but Poolpelt dug down, ignoring the pain in her frozen paws, until she reached the small body.

She carefully lifted Sunkit out—he didn't even smell like the nursery anymore—and kept digging.

There was no way Poolpelt was leaving her son for foxes when the snow thawed.

The ground ripped at her claws and rubbed her pads raw but she kept scraping the frozen earth until the hole was deep enough to protect her kit.
Numb, she laid Sunkit's body in the hole and covered it over.

She limbed back to camp on throbbing, stumbling paws.
There was one more thing she had to do.
One more lie to tell my Clanmates.
She slipped in through the dirtplace tunnel and quietly was able to make claw marks at the back of the nursery.

Then she padded through the den entrance, checked that Snowheart, Cinderkit, and Crowkit were asleep, climbed into her nest, and deliberately, loudly called an alarm to her Clan.

"My kits! My kits are gone!"

Chapter 43

Hawkflame spoke gently. "Poolpelt, would you like to join a hunting patrol today?"
Poolpelt gazed at him, trying to focus.

A moon had passed since she'd left Goldenkit with Goldenfur.
The nursery walls had been fortified with brambles.
Two warriors sat guard through each freezing night to make sure that no fox or badger would ever steal into the nursery again.

The Clan had believed Poolpelt's story—that she'd awoken to find her kits gone.
Every cat believed that they had been stolen by an animal that had snuck into the nursery, driven by starvation to venture into camp for the first time.
They'd searched the snowy forest for days, not knowing where to look, the scent trail killed by freezing snow.
Poolpelt had scoured the woods with her own Clanmates, numb with guilt, reminding herself over and over that she'd done it for the Clan.

Meanwhile hunger and sorrow gripped the Clan.
They spoke in low voices and huddled in knots, eyeing Poolpelt with pity that stabbed her like thorns.
She was sick of telling lies.

She hardly noticed how empty the fresh-kill pile was these days.
She was too miserable to eat, wishing only to hide in sleep.

She felt as though the shard of ice piercing her heart would never melt.
She'll be safe with Goldenfur.
The thought wasn't enough to ease her grief.

Was Sunkit watching from StarClan, hating Poolpelt for stealing his

life?
Had Feathershine explained that his life had been sacrificed for the good of the Clan?

"Poolpelt." Hawkflame rested his tail on her shoulder and repeated his question. "Do you feel up to hunting?"

"I'll hunt with you, if you like." Braveheart hurried to join her.
Sadness shadowed his gaze.
He was grieving as a father would grieve.
He'd worked harder than any other cat to reinforce the nursery, and his pelt was still tufted and scratches from the brambles he'd woven tightly along the stone walls.
Poolpelt wished she could tell him that the two kits lived on, safe and cherished, across the river.

She shrugged off Hawkflame's tail. "I'd rather hunt alone."
Hawkflame nodded. "As you wish."
Braveheart turned away, his eyes clouding.

"Poolpelt!" Amberleaf caught up to her, pressing close as she padded toward the tunnel. "Are you going to be all right?"
No! Nothing will ever be all right ever again. Poolpelt longed to curl up against her best friend's warm fur and go to sleep for a moon.
"I'll be fine," she replied, feeling hollow.

She scrambled up the side of the ravine and headed into the snowy forest.
As the Owl Tree came into view, a squirrel darted across her path.
She froze, her paws burning with cold on the ice-hardened forest floor.
The squirrel had a nut in its jaws and was scrabbling among the roots of an oak.

Poolpelt dropped into a hunting crouch, tail straight, belly lifted from the snow.
Sunkit. Does he still remember his IceClan hunting crouch in StarClan?

Pushing away the thought, she thrust down with her hind paws and sprang, landing squarely and killing the squirrel with a single bite.

"Nice catch."
Flowertail's rasping mew made her whip around. The squirrel swung from her jaws.
She dropped it. "What are you doing here?" The elders rarely made it up the ravine.
"I still have legs, you know," she snapped.

To was jarring to hear a Clanmate speak to her in a voice that wasn't honeyed with sympathy. She straightened and met her gaze.
"What do you want?"
"You did the right thing."
"For whom?"
"For your Clan." Flowertail narrowed her eyes. "The prophecy left no room for kits. You must blaze *alone* at the head of your Clan."

"Is that supposed to make me feel better?"
Flowertail blinked. "It is not your destiny to feel better; it's your destiny to save your Clan."
"And I will. But I will always regret what I've done."

"The kits were your choice," Flowertail pointed out. "StarClan made no provision for them."
"StarClan made me sacrifice everything I loved. Goldenkit—!"
Flowertail cut her off. "They're alive, aren't they?"

"Not Sunkit."
"StarClan will honor his loss."
"What about *my* loss?"

"It is small compared with the fate of your Clan."
Poolpelt shook her head, trying to clear it.
Was she just being selfish?
What was one broken heart compared to the safety of her Clanmates?
Where was her loyalty?
She dipped her head. "I'll serve my Clan," she promised.

"Good." Flowertail nodded. "Icestar wants to talk to you."
She padded away into the snowy trees.

Poolpelt met the IceClan leader as she was climbing over the top of the ravine.
"Poolpelt." Icestar greeted her. "I wanted to talk to you away from the camp." She headed into the snowy forest. "Walk with me."

Poolpelt fell in beside her old mentor, remembering how she had spoken to her after the death of Whiteclaw and Raindapple and again when she'd been grieving for Feathershine.
"Is this another lecture to tell me to leave the past behind?" she said sarcastically.
She shook her head. "It seems you are destined to suffer," she sighed.

Poolpelt,looked into her eyes and saw how the IceClan leader had aged in the last few seasons.
Making IceClan strong and feared among the other Clans had cost her three lives in battle; sickness had taken another two.

The IceClan leader ducked under a low-hanging fern. "I can tell only what I've told you before. Life goes on."
They brushed past a snowy bush, hazing the branches with snow. "Leaf-bare is followed by newleaf and then by greenleaf. You must take heart from that, after the loss of your kits. I know that you will be okay—and even stronger than before."

Would she be so sympathetic if she knew one of them lived on, with DawnClan?
The fur prickled along her spine at the thought.

They padded farther through the snowy trees, and saw Icerocks coming forward and they sat down at the shore of the river, watching the river flowed through the two sides.

"Are you ready to take on the deputyship?" she asked.

This was it. The moment she'd longed for.
The reward for what I have given up.

"Rainpelt won't get any better," Icestar went on. "She's asked to move to the elders's den. A new deputy must be found."
She gazed hard into her eyes. "Will you be that deputy?"

Poolpelt blinked. "What about Blackfrost?" She had to know why Icestar hadn't chosen the fierce warrior instead of her.

Icestar stared into the trees. "Blackfrost would be a popular choice," she conceded. "No cat can doubt his courage, or his battle skills, or his pride in his Clan. But I don't want my Clan to be led into endless fighting. Our borders are strong enough without being marked over and over in blood. IceClan deserves to live in peace, and I believe you can give it that."

Icestar repeated her offer. "Are you ready, Poolpelt?"
Poolpelt nodded. "I'm ready."

The drifts sparkled in the dying sun, and pink light dappled the snowy clearing.

Icestar climbed up onto the Highrock. "All cats old enough to drift in the snow, gather below the Highrock for a Clan meeting!"
All cats stood and padded forward, sitting down.

"Rainpelt, step forward."
Rainpelt nodded and took a step forward, her shoulders were hunched, her haunches drawn in as though in pain. Her ribs pushed against her ragged pelt.

"Rainpelt, is it your wish to give up the name of a warrior and go to join the elders?"
Rainpelt dipped her head low. "It is."
Icestar purred. "Your Clan honors you and all the service you have given to us. I call upon StarClan to give you many moons of rest."
"Rainpelt! Rainpelt!" The clans cats cheered.

As Rainpelt went back into the crowd, Icestar looked down at her Clan. "I say these words before StarClan, so that the spirits of our warrior ancestors may hear and approve my choice. The new deputy of IceClan is Poolpelt!"
"Poolpelt! Poolpelt!"

She felt the pale sun warm her pelt and breathed in the scents of the forest, her home.

And now her territory, even more than before.

Featherfall cheered for her, pride singing in her yowl.
But Blackfrost drowned her out with a yowl that reached for StarClan.
Poolpelt shifted her black paws.
The warrior's eyes were gleaming with fury, and she guessed his loud call was just a trick to fool the Clan into believing the new deputy had his full support.

Whatever it had cost her, she was the only cat who could stand in Blackfrost's way.
Only she knew what he was capable of.

For the first time in moons, there was enough fresh-kill for a feast. Early newleaf had brought mice from their holes and birds from their secluded leaf-bare nests.

As the Clan cats shared what they had, Icestar beckoned Poolpelt to her den.
"I know I've made the right choice." Icestar swished through the lichen and sat down, a silhouette in the shadowy den. "You still have a lot to learn, but I'm looking forward to mentoring you again."
Poolpelt dipped her head. "I'm ready to learn."

The Clan leader shook her head. "We must work together if we are to guide the Clan well. Never be afraid of sharing your worries with me."

Icestar went on, "You have suffered much and lost much, and yet you still serve your Clanmates, putting their needs before yours, willing to sacrifice all for the sake of your Clan."
"My Clan is all I have now," Poolpelt confessed. "I will give every breath in my body to serve it." Regret tugged in her belly.

But I am the bluest flames. And this is the path I will follow.

Chapter 44

"Come on!" Owlpool called softly from the shadows inside Mothermouth.
Poolpelt breathed the cold, mineral air flooding from the dark opening.

It reminded her of her trip there many seasons before, with Silverstar.
Now she had come to receive her nine lives.
When she returned to her Clan she would be Poolstar, leader of IceClan.

She remembered Icestar's death with a pang; she had been slaughtered by a fox before a patrol could come to her rescue.

Owlpool led her down to the cave of the Moonstone.
The darkness pressing around her still made Poolpelt uncomfortable.
It felt as though she were drowning in thick black water that she could taste but not feel.
At the end of the tunnel, the cave was filled with shadows.
Watery starlight filtered through the hole in the roof, scarcely penetrating the dark.

"Not long till Moonhigh," Owlpool promised.

Poolpelt padded across the rough cave floor and lay at the foot of the Moonstone.
It stood solid and dull in the center of the cave, untouched by moonlight.
But as Poolpelt rested her nose between her paws, the moon began to slid across the hole in the arching roof and the crystals began to shimmer like tiny trapped suns.
Dazzled, Poolpelt flinched away.

"Press your nose against it," Owlpool urged.
Screwing up her eyes, Poolpelt leaned forward and touched the Moonstone.
It was cold and smelled of darkness and old, old rock.

Instantly the cave rushed away and Poolpelt felt herself being swept through blackness, darker than night, tossed and swirled on an invisible river.

Panic seized her and she flailed her paws, until suddenly she felt soft grass beneath them.

Blinking open her eyes, she saw the Great Rock rising above her and the four great oaks marking each corner of the clearing.
She was at Fourtrees.
Alone.
She glanced up at the crow-black sky, speckled with stars.

Why were there no cats there to receive her?

Then the stars began to swirl like leaves caught in an edgy.
They gathered speed until they blurred together in a silvery spiral, down, down, down toward the forest, toward Fourtrees, toward her.
Poolpelt waited, her heart in her throat.

The spiral of starlight slowed, and the cats of StarClan stalked from the sky.
Frost sparkled at their paws and glittered in their eyes.
Their pelts shone like ice, and they carried the scent of all the seasons on their fur: the tang of leaf-bare snow mingled with the green scent of newleaf, the musk of leaf-fall, and the sweet blossom of greenleaf.
Countless cats lined the hollow—bodies shimmering, eyes blazing—and filled the slope in silence.
Poolpelt crouched at the center.

She forced herself to lift her head and look at the cats, and stretched her eyes wide when she realized that some faces familiar.

"Welcome, Poolpelt." One clear mew seemed to ring with every voice she had known and loved.

Silverstar stepped forward and touched her nose to Poolpelt's head. It scorched her fur like frost and flame, but she could not flinch away.
Her paws were weighted like stones, her body frozen.

"With this life I give you selflessness," Silverstar murmured. "Use it well in the service of your Clan."
A bolt of energy, as fierce as lightning, searched through Poolpelt. She stiffened against the pain, but it melted into a soft warmth that filled her from nose to tail-tip.
She was left trembling as the warmth drained from her, and she braced herself for the next one.

As Silverstar turned away, another cat rose from the ranks of StarClan.
Whiteclaw.
Poolpelt felt her throat purr at seeing her father again, she wanted to say so many things, mostly *I miss you.*

He pressed his nose to her head. "With this life I give you courage. You will know how to use it."
Poolpelt felt flashes of fighting battles with the bravery of a lion.
Thank you, Whiteclaw.

Bladewing was beside her now, touching her nose to Poolpelt's head. "With this life I give you humor. Use it well to lighten the burdens of your Clan and the spirits of your Clanmates when despair threatens."
Something dazzling and flickering passed through her, making every hair on her pelt stand on end.
"You will know when to use humor to help you," Bladewing told her, and Poolpelt blinked gratefully.

Another cat was weaving through the ranks and toward her, a familiar face she hadn't seen in a long time.
Icepaw!

The apprentice's eyes shone like stars.
Poolpelt wanted to greet her but she couldn't move or speak.

Her heart ached with joy as Icepaw stretched up to rest her muzzle

on the top of Poolpelt's head. "With this life I give you protection," she announced solemnly. "Use it well to protect your Clanmates."
Fierceness fired through Poolpelt, the same feeling she felt over dying to protect her kits.

Icepaw padded away, and Feathershine took her place. "With this life, I give you hope. Even on the darkest night, it will be there, waiting for you."
Energy now fired through Poolpelt.
She was running through the snowy forest, her paws skimming the snow, with a bright light shining ahead of her.
Is that hope? I will never lose sight of it, I promise.

"With this life I give you determination." It was Flowertail's turn. Her gaze was lucid, her voice gentle. "Use it well to set your paws on the path of what you know to be right."
As her nose brushed against her ears, a fierceness flooded through her; a need to do everything in her power to defend IceClan.

Which cat would give her seventh life?

She scanned the ranks and purred when she saw that Sunkit was padding forward, his tiny paws sending up sparks of starlight where they touched the ground.

He had to rear up on his hind paws to touch Poolpelt's head. "With this life I give you pride. So that you may know your own worth and the worth of your Clan."
Heat seared Poolpelt's pelt, until she glanced down at her body, convinced she must be on fire.
It vanished with a hiss.
Would she ever have that much faith in herself?

"Sunkit." Poolpelt managed to find her voice. "I...I'm so sorry." ,
"It's okay, mom. I forgive you," Sunkit purred. "And I miss you."

Raindapple came next.

Poolpelt's heart ached as she felt her mother's nose touch her head as gently as she'd done when she had lived. "With this life I give you happiness. You will find it even in the most unlooked-for placed.

Whatever happens, never forget how to be joyful."
Life and beauty fluttered to her, and she felt a need to always see the bright side of things.

Poolpelt knew her last life would come from Icestar. Her mentor had watched the ceremony through gentle, glowing eyes.
Now she stepped forward.

"You have sacrificed so much," Icestar meowed. "And our Clan walks a safer path now."

Poolpelt felt her breath stir her fur as her mentor touched her head and went on. "With this life I give you bravery, even when you are walking into shadows. There will always be light, even in the darkest night."
Courage flourished through Poolpelt's heart, like a will to face off any threats even if she was scared.

Icestar purred. "I hail by your new name, Poolstar. Your old life is no more. You have now received the nine lives of a leader, and StarClan grants you the guardianship of IceClan. Defend it well; care for young and old; honor your ancestors and the traditions of the warrior code; live each life with pride and dignity."

Icestar went on. "Use all your nine lives for your Clan. We will be with you at every step. If you need us, we will come. You were chosen long ago, and StarClan has never regretted it's choice."

"Poolstar! Poolstar! Poolstar!"

Chapter 45

[image] [image] [image] [image]

StarClan has never regretted it's choice.
Icestar's words echoed in Poolstar's ears.

Many moons has passed since her naming ceremony.
Poolstar had led her Clan through countless seasons, good and bad.

She sat on the Highrock, letting the newleaf sunshine dapple her pelt.
The stone beneath her felt cold, and even the sun seemed unable to soften the chill beneath her pelt.
Leaf-bare had been reluctant to loosen its grip on the snowy forest, and prey was still scarce.

Even Featherfall looked bony underneath her thick pale white tabby pelt as she stretched beside the frozen nettle patch.
Thornwing sat beside him, wolfing down a scrawny shrew.

Shadowkit, Cherrykit, Flarekit, and Shinekit were play-fighting, chasing one another's tails and bundling one another around the snowy clearing.

Briarfang and Briarpool had given birth to two kits, Shadowkit and Cherrykit..

while Splashstream and Hawkflame had became mates and had Flarekit and Shinekit.

Dovenose, the IceClan deputy, sat beside Poolstar. "I bet they call that *training,*" she purred in amusement, flicking her tail toward the kits.

A fourth kit, Icekit, was stripping a frozen leaf from its stem, concentrating hard.

She carefully ran her claw around the stalk, unaware that Shadowkit was creeping up behind her.
Shadowkit pounced, landing neatly on Icekit's tail.
Shocked, the little frost white she-kit leaped into the air.

Poolstar shook her head.
Icekit had been nervous from the day she was born.
It had taken her mother nearly half a moon to coax her out of the nursery.

Poolstar hoped that, when she gives Shadowfoot to her as a mentor, the young cat will learn to have courage from the fearless warrior.

"Do you remember your first moon of training?" Dovenose asked.
Poolstar nodded, sighing as memories warmed her heart.
She had played like this with Featherkit, Duskkit and Bravekit.
All three walked with StarClan.

So many familiar faces were gone at a time when the Clan was hungrier than it had ever been: Hawkflame, Swiftfur, Braveheart, Bluefeather.

Even Blackfrost.
The black warrior had died just a few moons earlier, chasing DawnClan invaders out of the territory.
He had died as he lived, claws unsheathed, hungry for a fight, and his Clanmates had found him in a pool of blood, like the one Poolstar had seen staining the snow so many moons ago.

The Clan was weaker without him, but Poolstar did not miss him.
She would miss the once good cat Blackfrost had been.

But she also missed Braveheart.
Her faithful old friend had kept her secret till the end, only ever speaking of the lost kits with the fond grief of a father.
Poolstar still carried the guilt of never telling him that one of them lived on.
He'd know about that now; he'd see Sunkit from StarClan.

Finally he would understand why she'd watched that DawnClan cat with such interest, always seeking them out at Gatherings, cheering

with such warmth when her warrior name was announced.

Goldenpelt has become a fine warrior.
Goldenfur has raised her well, and she was very proud of her.

Did Goldenfur know that?
They had never shared words since the night she'd given him Goldenkit.
They kept apart at Gatherings, fearing that some cat might make the connection between the lost of Poolstar's kits and the appearance of a stray in DawnClan.
But she had never stopped loving him and Goldenpelt.
And the memory of their night at Fourtrees was lodged in her heart.

Poolstar sighed.
Dovenose glanced at her. "What's worrying you?"
"I was just thinking," Poolstar murmured. "We've had so few kits born recently. Who will keep the Clan strong and well fed through leaf-bare? The elders's den gets fuller each season." Ravenbird, Springleaf, and Snowheart all made their nests there now.

On the far side of the clearing, Owlpool and Lakepaw emerged from the medicine cat den.
Lakepaw had taken an interest in the knowledge of herbs and cures, and had decided to become a medicine cat apprentice.
Owlpool has been training her apprentice well, and Lakepaw was passionate about the wellfare of her Clanmates, even though she could sometimes have a fiery temper.

The black medicine cat looked exhausted.
The sun had risen that morning on a camp full of bleeding, disheartened warriors, driven back from Icerocks the day before after a desperate attempt to take it back from DawnClan.

They'd fought, with patrols led by Dovenose and Shadowfoot, who at times seemed fiercer and thirstier for battle than his mentor, Blackfrost, ever had.

And they had lost, been chased back into the snowy forest bloodied and humiliated.
Back to their camp of too many elders and no apprentices.

What will happen to IceClan now?

Chapter 46

Poolstar sat alone in the snowy clearing and gazed up at Silverpelt. All around her, the camp stirred with the restless murmuring of wounded warriors.

Unease chilled her pelt.
IceClan was weaker now than it had been since Silverstar had been leader.
Was this how she blazed through the ice?

Owlpool padded out of the medicine cat den and halted beside Poolstar.

Poolstar looked at her. "How is Cinderfall?"
"Her wounds are deep." Owlpool settled herself on the night-cool ground. "But she is young and strong. She'll heal quickly."
"And the others?"
"They'll survive."

Poolstar sighed. "We're lucky not to have lost any cat." She tilted her head again and studied the stars. "I'm worried by this defeat, Owlpool. IceClan hasn't been beaten in its own territory since I became leader," she murmured. "These are difficult times for our Clan. Newleaf is late, and there have been fewer kits. IceClan needs more warriors if it is to survive."

"There will be more kits when greenleaf comes," Owlpool pointed out calmly.
Poolstar shifted her paws. "Maybe. But training takes time. If IceClan is to defend its territory, it must have new warriors as soon as possible."

"Are you asking StarClan for answers?" Owlpool mewed, following Poolstar's gaze and staring up at the swath of stsrs glittering in the dark sky.

"Have they spoken to you?"
"Not for some moons."

Suddenly a shooting star blazed over the snowy treetops. Owlpool's tail twitched and the fur along her spine bristled.
Poolstar's ears prickled but she remained silent as Owlpool continued to gaze upward.

After a few moments, Owlpool lowered her head and turned to Poolstar. "It was a message from StarClan," she murmured. A distant look came into her eyes. *"The fire will spark in the darkness."*

Poolstar's tail bristled. "Fire?"

The IceClan leader fixed her deep blue gaze on the medicine cat. "You've never been wrong, Owlpool," she meowed. "If StarClan has spoken, then it must be so. The fire will spark in the darkness."

But how?

"Flowertail once said I would be the flames," Poolstar confessed, uneasy at sharing the medicine cat's prophecy after all these mooms.
"I know." Owlpool gazed at her leader with emerald, unblinking eyes.

"Was she right?" Poolstar leaned forward, desperate with curiosity. "You saved the Clan from Blackfrost's leadership. He would have drowned us in blood. And you've led the Clan through many moons, keeping it strong and safe."

Poolstar shook her head. "And now I have led it to defeat. That's not exactly blazing through the ice."
"Icerocks will be won and lost many more times," Owlpool shrugged.

"But if I have followed my destiny, why does StarClan still speak of fire now?"
"Perhaps you haven't finished," Owlpool mewed.
"What more can I do?"

A moon passed, and the Clan begun to recover from it's defeat.
At last newlwaf was pushing away the leaf-bare chill.
The snowy forest was starting to buzz with life, the trees a white haze, the frozen undergrowth starting to crowd the snowy floor once more.

Poolstar padded beside Featherfall as they walked alongside the Twoleg border.
"How much do you remember about Feathershine?" she asked.
She'd often wondered if Goldenpelt remembered her.
If they did, they never gave any clue of it at Gatherings.

"I remember her smell and the warmth of lying beside her," Featherfall replied. "Having you around kept her memory alive. You carried the same scent and sometimes, even now, I see my mother in the twitch of your whiskers or the flick of your tail."

Touched, Poolstar purred. "Do you remember the way Shadowkit was always leading you into trouble, then letting you take the blame?"
Featherfall flicked her tail. "We had fun, though."
"And Splashkit, Riverkit and Robinkit would do anything to get your attention. Splashkit even convinced you once that there was a fox trapped in the dirtplace!"

Featherfall glanced at her. "Why all this nostalgia?"

Poolstar stared straight ahead. "Do you think I've made the right choices?"
"Only StarClan knows that for sure," Featherfall replied. "We can only do what we think is right at the time."

"What if that isn't enougn?"
Featherfall halted and stood in front of her, worry darkening her gaze. "Why are you questioning yourself like this?" She sat down and wrapped her tail over her paws. "I know we lost Icerocks, but we'll win it back once the Clan is stronger. You are a good leader, strong and fair. The Clan respects you."

"I should never have let the Clan grow weak."
"It's been a tough leaf-bare." A blackbird fluttered onto a snow-filled

branch overhead and began its song. "But newleaf has come."

Poolstar breathed in the fresh smell of new life. The air was laced with prey-scent. "I wish it could always be this way. Peaceful, with plenty of food."
Featherfall's whiskers twitched. "If wishes were prey, we'd eat like lions come leaf-bare."
She stood up, preparing to move off. "But we'd die of boredom!"

Her mew grew more serious. "You know that's not what the life of the Clans is like. The warrior code guides us through the dark times, the cold and the hunger. And the good times seem all sweeter for it. Have faith, Poolstar. We'll survive."
She headed through the snowy trees and, sighing, Poolstar followed.
How had the tiny kit she'd helped raise become such a strong, wise warrior?

They wove along the tree line at the edge of the snowy forest, through air tainted with Twoleg smell.
Poolstar gazed at the Twoleg nest beyond the sunny stretch of scrub, thinking as she always did of Silverstar.

A flash of golden-brown pelt caught her eye.

A golden-brown kittypet tom was crouching on the fence.
He stared into the forest with eyes blue as juniper berries, flashing with interest.

"Wait." Poolstar halted Featherfall with a touch of her tail. "Keep still." She didn't want to frighten this kittypet.

The kittypet lashed his tail as the blackbird flittered from the snowy trees and swooped overhead.
The tom reared up on his hind paws, reaching out with unsheathed claws and missing the swooping bird only by a whisker.
"Not bad," Featherfall conceded.

The kittypet had kept his balance, and now he crouched again, tail twitching with frustration, eyes eager for another bird.

"Are you worried he'll be a threat to our prey?" Featherfall whispered.
Poolstar shook her head. She was rather impressed by his hunting technique.

He was just like a Clan cat.
Once the kittypet softness had been trained out of him...

No.

Poolstar shook her head.
What was she thinking?
The Clan did need new blood, new warriors to strengthen its ranks.
But a kittypet?

The golden-brown kittypet was still on Poolstar's mind as she shared tongues with Thornwing and Splashstream.
The Clan was content, well fed for the first time in moons, and warm.

"What's wrong?" Splashstream mewed.
"What?" Poolstar was jolted from her thoughts.
"You've been staring into the trees ever since you came back with Featherfall."
"Oh, nothing important." Poolstar got to her paws.

Maybe relaxing in the sun would clear her thoughts.

She leaped up onto the Highrock and rested down, watching over her Clan.

Her attention was brought to the kits play-fighting again..

Shadowkit grinned as he pushed Shinekit into the drift snow.
Shinekit let out a "uuf!" sound as she landed.
Shadowkit laughed. "Watch where you're going, Shrinekit!"

Flarekit went in between Shadowkit and Shinekit, hissing at Shadowkit with her little tail lashing fiercely. "Pick on somebody your own size, Shadowkit! Leave Shinekit alone!"

Poolstar's ears flicked.

Flarekit's pelt shine as sunlight streaked onto her pelt..

As Shadowkit stomped away fiercely, Flarekit stuck her tongue at Shadowkit and purred as she hulled Shinekit up.

Poolstar raised her head.

You were right, Flowertail.
A fire will blaze through this forest after all.

Epilouge

Poolstar skidded to a halt at the top of slope; the stench of dogs hit her throat.

Below, the ferns shook as dark shapes swarmed through the gully.

Flarepelt's bright orange pelt flashed like flame through the greenery.
She was keeping a good distance between herself and the pack, but the lead dog was breaking away and closing fast on the IceClan deputy.

Poolstar flung herself down the slope.
Gulping air, muscles burning, she wove around the trees, her paws skidding on the leafy forest floor.
She hurtled through a swath of ferns, running blind as the leaves whipped her face.

The gorge was close by.
She could hear the river crashing between the sheer gray walls.
Would Flarepelt really be able to lure the dog pack over the edge?
What if the pack's leader caught her first?

She erupted from the bracken and scrabbled to a stop in a clearing at the edge of the cliff.
Leaves sprayed into a chasm as her black paws slipped and slid.

No!

Flarepelt was dangling from the glistening jaws of a huge dog.
The IceClan deputy struggled, spitting with fury.
The dog shook her, its eyes shining with triumph, but its clumsy paws were skittering dangerous close to the edge of ghe gorge.

Poolstar couldn't let Flarepelt die, never.

Flarepelt, I will never let you die in a millions of moons.

Poolstar hissed.
She flung herself at Flarepelt's tormentor, slamming headfirst onto their muzzle.
The dog dropped first and spun around in surprise.

She gripped her unsheathed claws onto the dog's muzzle, blood streaking down it's snout, and leaving deep cripped scars along it's muzzle.
Red droplets dripped on the grassy floor below.

Poolstar dug her teeth and claws into the dog's face, closing her eyes as she sunk her teeth deeper.

Poolstar flailed, desperately slicing through the flesh of the dog's shoulder.
Desperate to keep Flarepelt safe.

She heard the dog growl in rage as the dog dug their teeth in Poolstar's flesh, and pain embedded her like fury.

She then felt the dog dig their razor sharp teeth into her shoulder, digging into her flesh.
Poolstar let out a roar of agony.

The dog swung their head around, and Poolstar realized the dog was now at a weak cliff side, dust spilling off it's side.

Poolstar knew what she was about to do.
She knew it would take away her last life.

But she would die millions of times to save her Clan from this monster.

She pushed in her hind legs and kicked them out, the cliff crumbling loudly.
Air whipped around her as the cliff broke apart and walls fell in beside her.

She could hear Flarepelt shout from the cliff edge, "Poolstar, no!"

The dog had fallen.
It's body thumped against the cliff, and there was a moment of quiet before she heard it splash into the roaring water below.

Wind roared around her, blasting her pelt as she fell.

She scrabbled desperately against the cold wet air.

The freezing river knocked the breath from her body.
Blind, she struggled against the current, fighting her way toward the air, her heart gripped by panic.

Flowertail's prophecy burned in her mind: *Teeth will destroy you.*

Her thick fur, heavy with water, dragged her down.
The blood washed away from her wounds and eased the pain a bit.
The river tumbled all around her; she didn't know which way was up.

Her lungs screamed for air.
Terror scorched through her.
She was going to drown, there in the foaming waters of the gorge.

Don't give up! A meow sounded clear and familiar through the roar of the water.
Goldenfur?

The father of her kit was murmuring in her ear: *It's like running through the forest. Let your paws do the work. Raise your chin. Let the water carry you up.*

His voice seemed to lift her, calming her panic, and she found that her paws were churning steadily through the water.
Her heart, tight with pain, slowed as she strained to raise her chin, until at last the wind whipped her face.
Coughing and gagging, she snatched a gulp of air.

That's the way, Goldenfur whispered in her ear.

Energy surged through Poolstar, and she began to fought the current.

The treetops blurred overhead as the river swirled her along.
You can do it! Goldenfur urged.
Poolstar churned at the water, but her exhausted legs felt like sodden leaves, flailing uselessly.

Suddenly teeth grasped her scruff.
Was Goldenfur going to drag her to safety?

Poolpelt blinked water from her eyes long enough to glimpse bright orange fur.
Flarepelt!
The IceClan deputy had gotten hold of her.

"Keep your head up!" She growled through clenched jaws.
Poolstar tried to help her, but her pelt was heavy and her black paws was embedding in pain from the blood loss of the fight with the dog.
Flarepelt's teeth tore at her scruff as water dragged her down.

Then another body brushed hers.
More teeth bit her scruff and a paw clutched at her flank, heaving her upward.

She felt the strong, gentle movement of a cat near her.
Was StarClan carrying her to its hunting grounds?

Barely conscious, she let herself be dragged through the water until pebbles scraped her flank and she felt solid earth beneath her.
Paws and teeth heaved her up the gritty shore and laid her on soft grass.
Her chest felt as if it was screaming in pain, making each breath a struggle.
Her eyes stung, too filled with water and pain to see.

"Poolstar?"
She recognized the mew of Goldenpelt.
"I'm here." A paw pressed against her flank.

Poolstar fought to open her eyes.
Goldenpelt stood, her golden pelt clinging to her frame.

Poolstar felt breath on her cheek.
"Is she okay?" came the voice of her daughter.

Flarepelt was leaning in. "Poolstar, it's Flarepelt. You're all right now. You're safe."
Poolstar hardly heard her.

Poolstar was gazing at Goldenpelt. "You saved me," she murmured.
"Shhh. Don't try to talk," Goldenpelt urged.
But there's so much to say!

Poolstar stretched her muzzle forward. "I want to tell you something... I want to ask you to forgive me for sending you away."

As she coughed, blood and water bubbled at her lips, but she forced herself to keep going. "Goldenfur promised me Flameflight would be a good mother to you."
"She was," Goldenpelt meowed flatly.

Poolstar flinched. "I owe her so much," she wished she had more breath to explain.

"Sunstar, too, for mentoring you so well." Why hadn't she found a way to tell them this before? "I watched you as you grew up, and I saw how much you had to give to the Clan that adopted you. If I had made a different choice, you would have given all your strength to IceClan." She shuddered, struggling for air. "Forgive me."

Goldenpelt bent her head and licked Poolstar's cheek. "I forgive you, Poolstar."

Poolstar purred softly as her daughter began to lap at her drenched and bloodied pelt.
It was the first time she had shared tongues with them since the snowy day she had left her with Goldenfur.

"What can we do?" Flarepelt asked Goldenpelt anxiously. "This is her last life, and she'll never make it back to the IceClan camp. Will you go and fetch your medicine cat?"
"It's too late for that, Flarepelt." Goldenpelt's mew was low and gentle. "She is on her way to StarClan."

"No!" Flarepelt protested.

Flarepelt crouched beside Poolstar and pressed her muzzle against hers. "Poolstar—Poolstar, wake up! We'll get help for you—hold on just a bit longer."

Poolstar...
Poolstar's eyes flickered open and looked at the water past her shoulder.
She could see the faint outline and starry pelt of Goldenfur.
My love... you're here.

Her gaze was filled with peace. "Goldenfur," she murmured. "Have you come me? I'm ready."

"No!" Flarepelt protested again.

"Poolstar, don't leave us," she begged.
"I must," Poolstar whispered. "I have fought my last battle."

She whispered, remembering all the battles IceClan has faced. "When I saw the Clan at Icerocks, the strong helping the weak... and I knew you and the others had gone to confront the pack... I knew my Clan was loyal. I knew StarClan had not turned their backs on us. I knew..."
Her voice frailed and she struggled to continue. "I know that I could not leave you to face the danger alone."

"Poolstar..." Flarepelt's voice shook.

She placed her deep blue eyes onto Flarepelt, and remembered with a smile of Owlpool's prophecy. "The fire will spark in the darkness," she murmured.

"You never understood, did you?" Poolstar went on. "I doubted it myself, when fire raged through our camp. Yet I see the truth now. Flarepelt, you are the fire who will save IceClan."
Flarepelt stared at her leader.

Above her head, wind tore the clouds into shreds, letting a ray of sunshine strike down and touch her bright orange pelt to flame, just as it had in the snowy clearing all those moons ago when she was a

kit.

"You will be a great leader," Poolstar's voice was the merest whisper. "One of the greatest the forest had ever known. You will have the warmth of fire to protect your Clan and the fierceness of fire to defend it. You will be Flarestar, the light of IceClan."

Poolstar let out a soft sigh.
There was no need to cling to her last life.

Flarestar would kindle a new flame and blaze through the forest in her place.
IceClan was safe.

She closed her eyes and gave way to dizzying blackness.

And the next thing she knew when she opened her eyes, she felt tears of joy splatter on the soft grass.

She nuzzled them as Thornwing, Raindapple, Whiteclaw, Feathershine, Icestar, Silverstar, Owlpool, Braveheart, Goldenfur and Sunkit surrounded her in happiness.